

Ryan Virden: The only way out of this is through this. We have to acknowledge it. We're not going to ignore our way into racial justice, into harmony, into right relationship, or thriving community. The only way to do that is to acknowledge that, yeah, we set our systems up in this way and that wasn't fair. How do we repair?

Sam Fuqua: That's Ryan Virden, 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 Ryan Virden about history and about the wound of whiteness. He's an educator, author, and the founder of *LIR Cultural Coaching*. We spoke with Ryan Virden at the 2024 White Privilege Conference.

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

Alexis Miles: Hi, Sam.

Sam Fuqua: We're so pleased to be joined for this episode of Well, That Went Sideways! by Ryan Virden. Welcome.

Ryan Virden: Hey, uh, thank you for having me.

Sam Fuqua: Great to have you with us. You know, I noticed in the book you've been working on, you're, you're focused on this concept of self interest. You're kind of trying to address, uh, white people's engagement with racism as a form of self interest, right?

Ryan Virden: Absolutely, yeah. I think when self interest gets talked about, we understand it in terms of accumulation of material goods as a, and that's a product of how we just understand what success and what health looks like, right? It's being wealthy. It's having access to resources. And I'm not suggesting that those things aren't important. If you can't eat and you can't take care of yourself, you're not going to be healthy. You're not going to feel good about yourself. But I think, uh, what we know to be true about humanity is that our, our true interest, what truly makes us happy is connection, is community, is relationship. And so, I think whiteness and white supremacy has disconnected white folks from that and that if we're ever going to realize a world free from whiteness and white supremacy, we have to address that piece of what, of, of ourselves. What I call the wound of whiteness on white folks, um, and realize that our self interest is actually back in reconnection with humanity.

Alexis Miles: So, Ryan, I think that there are some white people who would respond to you, "Ryan, it's all about merit. We live in a meritocracy. The things I have are because I worked hard, I earned them."

Ryan Virden: Some people would definitely say that. I think there's a few ways I would respond to that. First and foremost, I would say that by virtue of being human, everybody is worthy of basic human dignity, human rights, such as health, housing, food, having a family, things like that. And so, when we're living in systems and we're embracing policies that keep human beings from those things, I think we're in violation, right? And then, there's a, a, a level of response to that statement around just the validity that we actually live in a meritocracy. I think some folks would like to believe that what they have is based off merit. And the reality is that they've been artificially propped up by systems that were designed and made to prop them up. Such as, well, I'll tell my own story.

I am a first generation college graduate. And, the reason I could go to college is because my family could co-sign on my student loans and put the house up as collateral. There are so many families who could not do that because the FHA program that allowed for home ownership was racially restrictive, right? And so, did I work hard? Yeah, not as hard as I could have because maybe I wouldn't have needed a loan if I would have worked harder, but I was able to overcome that what I would maybe argue is a lack of merit and prove myself in a college classroom because I was white, because my family was white and we could own a home, right? I grew up with a lot of folks. Black people particularly, who didn't have that option. Were smarter than me, had more merit than me, um, but couldn't afford to take out a student loan and prove themselves in that space. And so I think that's important to, to keep in mind for a lot of reasons. One, I think it demonstrates that the idea of meritocracy can, can kind of be the antithesis of community. That, that somehow we're separating ourselves, that when we all do well, we don't, we don't all do well. Right? Or that you could do well without anybody else. I think that's a, uh, a dangerous idea. But also, the idea that we're free from, uh, influence from the outside world, I think is just pretty delusional, honestly.

Alexis Miles: I agree with you that that's delusional, but yet that delusion has been used to prop up a system of, um, inequality, inequity, unfair distribution of resources.

Ryan Virden: Yeah, absolutely it has. There's no, I don't think, there's no doubt about that, in my mind, right? I think there might be some folks out there who are still saying that systemic racism doesn't exist. As a matter of fact, we heard Nikki Haley say that. Right? Um, that's unfortunate, um, that there's a certain segment of our population that wants to deny what I believe is fairly obvious. Um, I just, you can look it up, and that's true, right? Uh, there's still 40 million families living on homesteaded land. That's stolen land that they didn't pay for. But beyond that, the system is propped up to do what it does, right? To ho, to prop up white folks, those legally considered white, give them advantages, and it's meant to keep white folks happy in the system, to meet some level of their interest, and where I would say, why I think, and I think that's why it's been so effective, right? It offers white folks privilege, and our current anti-racism says that privilege is wrong. That's, that's true. It's not that it's not true, but it's hard to tell people who are being propped up that they're being propped up is wrong.

And what I'm saying is, not only are you being propped up, and not only is that wrong, it's also not in your best interest because that propping up separates you from community, it separates you from creation. It requires a level of disconnect from humanity that is poisonous, that is deleterious to our souls. And ultimately will cost us not only everything, literally, I mean, look at climate change, look at, uh, COVID and our response to it and our inability to keep each other safe, but it costs us spiritually. It costs, uh, our happiness in, in so many ways. I think by, there's an endless set of data that suggests we're not as happy, where our happiness is at a historic lows. White folks, particularly white men, are taking their own lives at historic rates. These are not signs of a healthy, happy community or society. And so, yes, you're being propped up. Yes, that's unfair. And, yes, that's bad for you. Like, another reason why we should not do this.

Alexis Miles: So, I am wondering how you came to this understanding. Because as I see it, it's like a fish in water. It's hard for the fish to become aware it's in water. I mean, maybe impossible. So, how did you come to this insight?

Ryan Virden: I hope it's not impossible. I will say that. I don't believe it's impossible, otherwise I wouldn't be doing this work. My honest answer to that is I came to it through economic justice. My family grew up working class. I watched my, my mother and my father, shout out to them. Um, my dad was a cook, my

mom was a waitress. They were working their butts off and we were struggling to make ends meet. And I knew that that wasn't right. And I knew that the kindest, most loving, most generous people that I knew, people in similar circumstances, right? And I knew the people who didn't help, who didn't want to support people, who weren't in connection were wealthier folks. And so, I kind of knew that that demonstrated to me that there was something, uh, about the accumulation of material goods that was, that disconnected us from people, right? And I don't, I don't mean to say that if you have nice things, you're a terrible person. I'm in a position in my life where I like nice things. And I do believe we can come up with an economic system where that doesn't require the exploitation of others to have nice things. So I, I, I want to say that.

But to, to, to answer your question, it made me curious. That reality made me curious about what was going on. And as I learned about white privilege from folks who have dedicated their lives and put their safety at line. I'm thinking of folks like Tim Wise, folks like Peggy McIntosh, folks like Robin D'Angelo. Uh, and I'm purposefully naming white folks because they look like me. They were from my community who were saying this is not good for, for you. Um, this, the order of things isn't fair. It became easy to see that the reason that we were living in those material conditions was because we were being promised something that was fraudulent. The, what W.E.B. Du Bois calls the wages of whiteness, the psychological wages of whiteness. And that those didn't keep food on people's tables, those didn't, those didn't pay rent. But they did keep me from being in solidarity with folks that had a lot of interest with me, that were living in common conditions. Learning about the fraudulent and fluid nature of whiteness, right? Learning that it was, uh, what we would now call a multiracial rebellion that gave birth to whiteness. Bacon's Rebellion, right? And that our natural inclinations as humans experiencing similar things is to create community together.

Um, I think one of the, one of the most insidious things that we talk, that we say about America is that, uh, a multiracial democracy is utopia, that it just is inherently not gonna happen. Our actual inherent, like, nature, is to come together when we're in similar conditions. We know that the, the historical record is, is full of examples of that. And then my work at the Cultural Wellness Center, which asked me to study what, what my people were before we were white. And so, learning that there were actual rituals, there were gods we prayed to, there were foods we ate, there were things, celebrations, there were dances that we did, all the, the cultural practices that we, that we partook in, that we had to give up in order to be included in this thing called whiteness. And that, that felt like something was taken from me. Rather than something was given to me, something was taken from me. Um, and so that is, that's how I, like, began to explore this idea that whiteness is not in our best interest.

Sam Fuqua: Give us a little quick history lesson, Bacon's Rebellion and its connection to the development of whiteness, if, if we can do that in a, in a short amount of time.

Ryan Virden: I'm going to try to do it in a short amount of time. You're making the history teacher in me very happy right now. So, Bacon's Rebellion is a part of historic, history standards across the country, although, well, they were, who knows what's a part of history standards nowadays, uh, in the last couple years. And typically, it's framed as this rebellion that happens in Jamestown, Virginia, because Nathaniel Bacon, organizes the angst of colonists who are upset that they can no longer expand west into native land. And there's settler colonialism and whiteness all in there. We're going to try to keep this short, so I'm not going to go into all of that. But, uh, that's typically where the history books stop. And it's meant to demonstrate the, the independent spirit of America, that there was no way England was going to keep us

as a colony and we were going to be independent and it was just a matter of time before, before the War of Independence.

Uh, that's actually not the most important thing about Bacon's Rebellion though. The most important thing is after, uh, so the English actually ended up having to send the Navy, they had to come in and they had to squash it. Bacon's Rebellion lasted for over a year. And, they asked the colonists, uh, particularly William Berkeley, who was the governor of Virginia, like, what are you going to do to keep this from happening again? It's too expensive for us to come in here. Basically, get your stuff together. And they said, don't worry, we're going to divide and conquer this group of people. And how they did that was through the creation of race. So, particularly, anti-miscegenation laws. So, they pass laws in the colonies that kept white folks from marrying African and native people. Um, and it's the first time that a group of people has ever called white, um, is, is in those laws. And so, it creates this group identity. Then they pass a series of laws that elevated that group of people called white over everybody else, particularly black people. So, they did things like made it illegal for black people to carry guards in Virginia.

If you were free, if you were a free African person in Virginia, you had to leave. Um, you couldn't, you couldn't testify in court. You couldn't enter into contracts of indenture even. Um, you could only be enslaved for life. And so, they pronounced the bottom and they created privileges. They advantaged the top, those people considered white, and then it left an in-between, it left a lot of Euro ethnic groups in an in-between position, and unfortunately, those groups decided that they needed to adhere to whiteness and assimilate into whiteness and they did that through embracing anti-black racism. That's the importance of Bacon's Rebellion.

Alexis Miles: The interesting thing is I didn't know about that rebellion until a couple of years ago when my friend wrote a play about it. So, all of that education, never heard it.

Ryan Virden: Yeah. Uh, and that doesn't surprise me. That's how whiteness operates, right? They want white folks to believe that the, the way things unfolded was the natural way it was gonna unfold. It was, it was predestined. It was unavoidable, which is not true, right? And then also, not dissimilar to today, the stories we tell are important. People are drawn to narrative. They care about people's experiences. And so, if you keep the truth and the actual experiences of people and why things happen from, from the general public, you're going to be able to control what people believe and what they know and what you can tell them is true. It's not an accident that Bacon's Rebellion is framed the way it is in, in history books. I was fortunate enough, and I tell this story in, in, in my book, I happened to come across this, this knowledge because I was coaching at my college. So, I played college baseball, and when it became clear I wasn't going to play professionally, I was like, okay, I'll coach and I'll go teach history, because I like that. And, after practice one day I was walking in the quad at Hamline University and there was a blind gentleman who would have students read to him. And both of my grandparents on my paternal side were blind. And so, I went up to him and I was like, "Hey, do you know Joe and Alice Virden?" And he, you know, turned his face towards me and was like, "No, why would I?"

And, and because I was so embarrassed, like all blind people don't know each other, obviously, right? Um, but because I was so embarrassed, I was like, "Oh, you know, I, never mind. What are you reading?" And he was reading *A People's History of the United States*. And that, I had just graduated with a social studies degree, history focused, past the, the, what is supposed to be the most rigid and rigorous teacher exam in the country, right, for Minnesota. I could teach, I was certified to teach history and I didn't know 75, 80

percent of the stuff in that book. And so again, it's not an accident. That's, they don't want you to know. And yet, the information's out there. Which is hard for white people, right? Because the information is out there and we don't know. Um, or we have to come to grips with we didn't go try to find out. Uh, and that's a process too, but it's not an accident.

Sam Fuqua: Coming up to today, I want to ask you about how some on the right use Affirmative Action as a strawman to kind of, in one way, undermine the class analysis that you shared with us earlier. Like, it's, uh, it's unfair advantage.

Ryan Virden: I think it's unfair advantage when you accept that, you accept white supremacy, right? And I don't mean you accept that white people are inherently better, although that's a conclusion that you must come to. When I say white supremacy, I mean accepting the fact, and I, I mean the, like I can't overemphasize that word, the fact that institutions, policies, and practices were set up to favor and elevate those folks considered white.

Sam Fuqua: And, Affirmative Action was a response to that.

Ryan Virden: Right. And so, it feels unfair when you have accepted that the order of the systems was supposed to elevate white people. So, it's unfair that now it's not doing that. And, the reality is that has always existed, that's always been a contradiction in America that we have never, it's a conflict that we have never adequately dealt with. And, the only way out of this is through this. We have to acknowledge it. We're not going to ignore our way into racial justice, into harmony, into right relationship or thriving community. The only way to do that is to acknowledge that, yeah, we set our systems up in this way and that wasn't fair. How do we repair? How do we re, how, you can't restore to that because the restoration is to something that was fundamentally unequal. And this is where, uh, Adrienne Maree Brown's work and other folks where they, they talk about transformative justice. We have to be transformative. We're going to have to adjust and transform our systems to rectify that fundamental wrong. That fundamental harm. And, Affirmative Action tried to do that, but even that, this is what's, this is what's wild about that is, and again, where white people get this wrong, we're missing the point, is the beneficiaries of Affirmative Action are white women.

So, white women are gonna struggle the most when we cut off, uh, Affirmative Action policies. But that doesn't matter because what needs to be in place, I, I should say that doesn't matter to folks making decisions. It doesn't matter to whiteness because what needs to be in place is the elevation of white people, right? And so, the idea and the narrative that Affirmative Action is for oppressed communities of color, it opens the door too much, to accept that, opens the door too much for a critical analysis of whiteness, and that's why we don't do it. Despite the fact, that white women are going to hurt more than any other group, which is not fair either. I want to be clear, right? But that's how whiteness operates.

Alexis Miles: So, you have developed a workshop called *Breaking the Privilege Frame: Developing Mutual Interest in Dismantling White Supremacy*. Can you tell us what you hope to accomplish with that?

Ryan Virden: Yeah, absolutely. I hope to accomplish the destruction of white supremacy. Now, let me talk about the, I'm a t, I was a teacher, so I can scaffold some goals for that. I'm from Minneapolis, and, uh, was there when George Floyd was murdered. And I was there during the summer of racial reckoning. I was the

Coordinator of Restorative Justice for Minneapolis Public Schools during the uprisings and after. And I saw this moment where everybody was open to the idea that race mattered. Everybody wanted to be anti-racist, and I mean that genuinely, I think people's intentions were pure. I should say many of them. I want to believe that their intentions were pure, right? And, unfortunately, what I saw was a squandering of that moment, if I'm telling the honest truth, right? I saw that a reliance on systems that had been in place, and I heard talk of returning to normal, and a lack of an understanding that normal was unjust, or unacceptable. And then, I think most disturbingly, or I should say, uh, what hurt the most was I saw white folks who, again, I think had a genuine interest and, and, and solid intent quit, just stop, you know. And that wasn't just in Minneapolis.

If you look at Pew research, you see during the summer of racial reckoning, support for the term Black Lives Matter hit an all time high. Nearly 70 percent of adults, uh, which included white folks, which if you know anything about, to, to put that in context, at the height of Jim Crow, the summer before the, the Civil Rights Movement or around that time, I forget the exact date, only like 50-something percent supported civil rights, right? Like, or thought that that was a problem. So, 70 percent supported the term Black Lives Matter, but then 18 months later, um, or, you know, about a year or so later, support had fallen to a level below where it was before George Floyd was murdered. So, we had this spike and then we saw a regression. And so, it had me thinking, what was, why did that happen? How did that happen? You had all these people who, even if they hadn't been thinking about it previously, now had this knowledge, now had stated this commitment. How did this happen?

And my answer to that was we didn't understand what we gained from it. We were constant, white, we, as in white people, we're thinking about and engaging with pure intent, I'll give, I'll say that, but we're doing so for somebody else. For communities that we weren't a part of or didn't see ourselves a part of. Um, and therefore, when times got tough and it got sticky, which is, if you've dealt with race at any level, you realize it's going to get sticky, it's going to get messy, we quit. We just said, nah, I'm not going. And, I think we did that because we didn't understand what we could gain from a world free of white supremacy. We didn't address the wound of whiteness on us. And so we're doing, when you're doing things for other people, you're never gonna get to where you need to go. Um, and so, that's what I'm hoping to do, is hoping to say, hey, we have a mutual interest in this. And I think communities of color have known that. Right? I've never, I have not heard communities of color say what we need is to get rid of white people or is to flip the hierarchy. I've heard them say, stop oppressing us. Let us be, you know, give us the same things that you have. Um, and so the piece that's missing from that mutual interest is white people understanding they have a stake in it, which is why I will talk sometimes about the self interest of white folks being what's missing and that we don't understand that we benefit.

Sam Fuqua: Well, taking off from the title of the podcast, we ask our guests to describe a moment when things went sideways for you. What happened? How you reacted? And, what you learned.

Ryan Virden: I think I'll talk about one that I, uh, I hope feels like your audience could resonate with because I think it's fairly common. And it's being in a family or familial or friend gathering and somebody asks a question like, "Well, don't all lives matter?" Or, I support, you know, at the time, defund the police was a big thing. And so saying something like, "Oh, I support, I just wish they would use a different slogan." Or, or something like that. And I think, certainly for me there have been times where the response to that is one that is steeped in defensiveness. Is steeped in wanting to, um, assert the righteousness of your position. And, I think what happens is that we move away from what I call right relationship over right

analysis. And oftentimes, I think that that's true for how these conversations go sideways. Um, and so, there are many moments where I've been in those situations and, and, uh, I had an aunt say, you know, uh, "I support Black Lives Matter, but don't all lives matter?" And I think what happens there, or the way I chose to, to understand that is, that's my aunt expressing her, the wound of whiteness in her. Whiteness makes you feel like you don't matter. You're only an object. You're a means to an end. Uh, or you're your own individual. And so, if something isn't directly and explicitly about you, it can't possibly be of benefit to you.

And therefore, you can't understand that the term Black Lives Matter is actually an assertion of your own humanity as well as saying Black Lives Matter so I must treat them as human, and therefore, assert my own humanity within that, right? I think Frantz Fanon talks about the assertion of humanity in response to conflict. And so, that was the route I chose to take with her and, and had a productive conversation. Another one is, I actually have done work with white nationalist groups. Uh, yeah. And, it's actually some of my favorite work to do because the reality is white nationalists are successful in their recruiting. Recently, the ADL put out a report that white nationalist propaganda has hit an all time high in 2023. And, I think the reason they're so successful is because they offer community. They offer connection. Um, unfortunately that community and connection is around whiteness and division and hatefulness, right, but white folks are so hungry for that, that they're, they're drawn to it. And so, when I'm in those spaces, it's always a powerful moment when you can ask people to just say why or like to say more about what they think. And what I found is that when you can do that, and then literally hear them, and then stand in your integrity and say, "I have a different understanding. Can I share that with you?" That goes a long, long way because for whatever reason, white folks who are drawn to white nationalism feel like they don't have no say, they don't have no power.

Sam Fuqua: But I was going to say, you know, white nationalists do have the power of the ballot, and they're voting for Donald Trump.

Ryan Virden: That's white supremacy in action. Of course they do, right? I think we have to really understand how hurt white people are, and why they're flocking to him, because hurt, I've said this, and I think it's true. Right now, and I think throughout history, white people are hurt people, hurting people. And I think there's a body of literature now that supports that. The work of Resmaa Menakem, who talks about trauma being blown through people before we got to, before Europeans got to this continent, um, demonstrates that. And I hope that I can add to that conversation because I think that that, that's what it is, right? And we're not going to be healed by supporting, uh, somebody with the rhetoric of Donald Trump or these white nationalist groups.

Sam Fuqua: Ryan Virden, thanks so much for spending time with us and thank you for your work.

Ryan Virden: Thank you all for having me and, uh, keep up the good work.

Alexis Miles: That was very informative. Thank you.

Sam Fuqua: Ryan Virden is an educator, author, and founder of LIR Cultural Coaching. LIR is a sea god from Irish mythology, and it's spelled L-I-R. Ryan Virden's website is lirculturalcoaching.com. We spoke with him at the 2024 White Privilege Conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma.



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S5E6: HOW DO WE REPAIR? WITH RYAN VIRDEN

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