

Book Review For Board

Wise, Tim: Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial In the Age of Obama

This book is written by Tim Wise, a white man, who speaks and writes about the need for whites to take responsibility for eradicating racism. The book is written much as he speaks and is verbose at times. I will share some quotes from the book.

Tim Wise deals with two premises in this book

1. "Contrary to the beliefs of many, the evidence is clear: systemic racial discrimination and profound inequity of opportunity continue to mark the lives of persons of color, Obama's own successes notwithstanding." P. 8

2. Secondly, Wise sets forth the challenge to both black and white Americans. "Just as Obama has issued a challenge to black folks to be more responsible for the problems in their communities...so too must whites take personal responsibility for ongoing racism, racial injustice, and the unearned privileges we continue to reap as a result." P.11

There are two chapters in the book:

- Barack Obama, White Denial and the Reality of racism
- The Audacity of Truth: A call for White Responsibility

Wise gives three good news points to Obama's election:

1. "Obama's election to the presidency demonstrates that old-fashioned racism...though still far too prevalent in the nation, is capable of being defeated, especially when an effective coalition is put together, and when those who otherwise might fall back into patterns of bias and discrimination can be convinced that their interests...should outweigh their tendency to act on the basis of skin color." P. 19

2. "Secondly,...the level of cross-racial collaboration (especially among youth) that made Obama's victory possible was something rarely seen in American politics, or history." P. 20

3. "Finally, Obama's win indicates that when a person of color has the opportunity to make his case day after day, for at least a year and a half (and really more, since Obama had been introduced to the public four years earlier during the 2004 Democratic National Convention), he is fully capable of demonstrating to the satisfaction of millions of whites (if still not most), his intelligence, wisdom, and leadership capabilities, sufficiently to win the job for which he is interviewing." P. 21

Wise concludes this section by saying--"...the election of Barack Obama was not the result of a national evolution to a truly antiracist conscious or institutional praxis."

[Which means practice as opposed to theory.] P. 24

I am going to quote several passages from the second chapter of the book.

“...even with Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States, we will...need a back-up plan. For Obama cannot be relied upon, any more so than any other president or national leader, to shepherd our nation out of the wilderness of racism and inequality. The job is too great, and the single solitary man too small for such an effort. Which is to say that if we want the job done right, we’re going to have to do it ourselves, all of us.” P. 113

Wise outlines five things that whites must do to overcome the racism that exists in our society.

- “Whites must take personal responsibility for addressing racism and white privilege.” P. 116
- “Whites must learn to listen to (and believe) what people of color say about racism.” P. 120
- “Whites must be willing to hear (and grapple with) the oft-unspoken but real and disturbing history of their nation when it comes to race.” P. 131
- “Whites should discover and connect to the unheralded but significant historical tradition of antiracist white allyship.” P. 145f
- “Whites should speak up whenever and wherever we observe racism, overt or subtle, personal or institutional.” P. 147

The following is a quote cited by Wise of experience of a person of color today. Patricia Thompson is longtime New Orleans resident and flood survivor. She gives the following account.

[D]uring the time we were across the street from the Convention Center, these cops--I don’t know if they were police, but they were all in black, they had these guns, and they were banded real close together--they came up the street, and they were screaming all kinds of obscenities, and all kinds of racial slurs. And they were pointing guns at folk and demanding you to lay down.

At this particular time, I had really gotten tired of using the restroom on the sidewalk, and so I’m trying to get across the street into the Convention Center to use the restroom. At this point, these cops, whoever they were, they came up the street, they got these guns with the lights on them, you know, they pointing them at people saying, ‘Sit your so-and-so so-and-so down before I blow your so-and-so head off, you black so-and-so.’

I mean, God. At that point, it really felt like I was in the Twilight Zone. They’re treating us like criminals. But everybody had to adhere to what they said, so once they passed me, I pretty much stayed low, in just about a crawling position, trying to get across to the other street to get into the Convention Center to use the restroom.

What I seen when I cam out I will remember for the rest of my life....At this time, I’m crouched trying to get back into the parking lot....Everybody is sitting on the ground with their hands in the air. The cops are stationed in different spots, with their guns aimed on people. I

look at my 5-year-old granddaughter, Baili McPherson, and the light from one the guns was actually on her forehead.

My oldest daughter, Gayness, she's like, you want to go ballistic when you see someone do something like this to your child but you can't do nothing because, guess what, you and your child both might get killed. Baili is sitting with her hands in the air. And she's just past afraid, she's terrified. And she's asking her mama, Gayness, 'Am I doing it right?' because even the babies know the police kill in New Orleans. So she's asking her mama, 'Mama, am I doing it right, am I doing it right?' P. 124ff

Finally I quote the conclusion of the book:

Whites should speak up whenever and wherever we observe racism, overt or subtle, personal or institutional. Only with practice, with repetition, with sustained effort, can allyship for whites become second nature and a permanent feature of daily life in the United States. Indeed, white silence is the only privilege whites can voluntarily relinquish: the rest obtain as a matter of merely living as a member of the dominant group. That whites can opt for resistance will mean nothing, however, unless we actually chose to do so. This means in our schools and those of our children; at our workplaces; in our houses of worship, neighborhoods, community organizations, and families. It means critically assessing each and every policy, practice or procedure in place within the institutional settings where we operate, peeking under the hood of those structures to ferret out their inner-workings, and especially when those inner-workings are contributing to the maintenance of racial inequity and injustice.

Speaking out will not be easy: resisting injustice never is. And for white folks, so long practiced at maintaining our silence, it may well be among the more daunting tasks we have undertaken. But to not do it--to not challenge the racist remark, joke, policy or practice--is to collaborate with it, to give our assent, to undermine our personal and national pretensions to democracy. To remain silent, to fail in this endeavor is, in a strange way, to shirk our patriotic duty--to the extent we think such duties important--and to make our claims of national greatness out to be lies. It is to squander whatever progress we may take Barack Obama's election to herald, and to ensure that the change so many have hoped for will likely never materialize.

Perhaps the most important thing for all of us to remember is that which Martin Luther King Jr. tried to tell us in his last full book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*: namely, that "Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle."