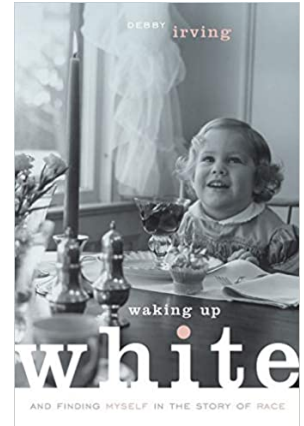


Skaneateles Library
Books by the Stack
Discussion Questions

Waking Up White

By Debby Irving



1. What stereotypes about people of another race do you remember hearing and believing as a child? Were you ever encouraged to question stereotypes?
2. What values and admonitions did you learn in your family? Think about education, work, lifestyle, money, expression of emotions, and so forth. Try making a list of ten principles, values, and unspoken beliefs. Siblings and cousins can be good resources for thinking about this. Now consider what conclusions you drew about people who did not appear to follow your family's belief system.
3. What were some of the major economic, political, demographic, and pop culture trends from ten years before your birth until age twenty? How did they show up in your life? How do you think they influenced your beliefs?
4. How connected to or disconnected from the larger world was your family, your school, your town? How much did you understand about conflict and struggle in your world or beyond? How did you make sense of people who had material wealth and people who didn't? What was your family's attitude about the people in power?
5. The late historian Ronald Takaki referred to the history taught in American schools as "The Master Narrative", the version of history told by Americans of Anglo descent. Think about what you did not study. Did you learn about Lincoln's views on enslaved black people? Anti-immigration laws of the nineteenth century? America's laws regarding who could and could not gain citizenship? The Native Americans who had once lived on your town's or school's land?
6. Have you ever uncovered a family secret or piece of information about a person or place that countered your previous perception? Once you learned the new information, were you able to look back and see clues that had been there all along but that you didn't recognize as evidence of a narrative you didn't yet know about?
7. How have you understood racial difference? In terms of biology? Culture? Have you given it much thought? Why or why not?

*Discussion questions adopted from Debby Irving's End-of-Chapter Questions

Skaneateles Library
Books by the Stack
Discussion Questions

8. Think about your ethnic heritage. If you are white and know little about it, why do you think that is? Do some ethnicities in your mix get played up and some down? What family stories have held fast through the generations? How have they shaped your understanding of America as a meritocracy – a society in which everyone succeeds or fails on their own merits?
9. Consider each of these tangible and intangible aspects of your life: work, sense of belonging, social connections, choice, education, healthy food, legal protection, housing, transportation, medical care. How easy or hard has it been for you to attain each?
10. Think of a time you grossly misinterpreted a person (of any race) or situation. What information was missing that allowed you to draw incorrect conclusions? What in your belief system contributed to your misinterpretation?
11. Have you ever had anyone doubt, dismiss, or minimize an experience that was formative for you? How did it feel? How did it affect your feelings about that person?
12. Think of a historical event in American history, perhaps the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the arrival of the Statue of Liberty, or any one of the wars Americans have fought. Where have you learned what you know about this event? Whose perspective did you learn? If you went in search of a fuller story, whose viewpoint would you seek?
13. If both of your parents are white, imagine just one of them being a person of color. Rethink your life from birth to the present. How would your race have influenced your experiences and your outcomes?
14. Have you ever been to an event that celebrated diversity? What did you learn about the various cultures' belief systems? Did the event give you insight to how a person from that culture might feel, given their cultural values and habits, if they tried to engage in an organization steeped in values and habits from the dominant white culture?
15. Challenge yourself in the next conversation you're part of to ask more questions than you typically would and refrain from offering your own opinion. Take note of where the conversation goes.

*Discussion questions adopted from Debby Irving's End-of-Chapter Questions