

**TEESHA HADRA** AND **JOHN HAMBRICK**



**BLACK** &

**DISRUPTING RACISM ONE FRIENDSHIP AT A TIME**

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To Mike Reimer and David Rohrer,  
“friends along the way”

—J. D. H.

To Fred, my partner in all things,  
“you have been God’s grace to me.”

—T. T. H.

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# INTRODUCTION

This book was written by two friends. One is a young black woman who grew up in South Florida. Her family is from Jamaica. The other is an older white man. He grew up on the beach in Southern California. His family is from Ireland, England, and Germany. That's us! Teesha and John. By all accounts, ours is an unlikely friendship. But it's the unlikely nature of our friendship that laid the groundwork for this book.

That said, we didn't create a friendship so we could write a book. We'd been friends for years before the idea of this book even entered our minds. But this book is based on our experience—on what we've each learned, through our friendship, about racism, power, and honesty. The idea that racism can be disrupted by friendship is not an abstract concept for us. It's our reality.

We worked together for years in the same department on the staff of Buckhead Church, one of the campuses of North Point Ministries, in Atlanta, Georgia. Our daily interactions established trust and respect between us. The trust gave us the courage to be truthful with each other. When our conversations turned to racial issues, we were confident that the trust and respect that we'd built between us would hold up. It did.

Of course our friendship was not limited to church matters and racial issues. Genuine friendship is never limited to ideological discussions. It's much bigger than that. We laugh a lot. There is the

## INTRODUCTION

occasional tear. Teesha met her husband in John's office. John officiated at their wedding two years later under a magnificent live oak tree in a vineyard in central California. And even in the midst of writing this book, we made time to talk about other things. The laughter continues. We realize we are writing about a very serious topic, but we don't take ourselves too seriously.

While this book focuses on the impact friendship can have in the battle against racism, we situate our consideration of friendship in a larger field: We talk about systemic racism. We talk, with sadness, about our country's racist history. We talk about the anger and fear that sometimes characterize conversation about race and diversity, especially when those conversations occur between people who don't look like each other. You'll notice that we present very few if any solutions to the complicated and often contentious issues we touch upon. Our aim is to get the problems out on the table for you to look at. We figure that if enough of us are looking at the problems together and asking good questions together, maybe solutions will start to emerge someday. We've included discussion questions at the end of each chapter—we hope these might promote reflection and conversation between you and a friend or within a small group.

We also hope that as you're reading, you'll sometimes feel inclined to cheer us on or shout "Amen!" We also suspect that you will occasionally become frustrated with us. You'll feel like we went too far or didn't go far enough. Sometimes, you'll think differently than we do about a particular topic. That's not a bad thing. If everybody thinks alike, nobody thinks very much.

So, thank you for picking up this book. Thank you for your patience with us. And most of all, thank you for caring enough to consider forming a friendship or two with someone who doesn't look like you. There's no better way to wade into the battle against racism than to wade into it together.

—John and Teesha

## Chapter Seventeen

# FRIENDSHIP 101

*When someone asked Abe Lincoln, after he was elected president, what he was going to do about his enemies, he replied, “I am going to destroy them. I am going to make them my friends.”*

*—possible apocryphal tale that  
John and Teesha really like*

**S**ome of you don't need a chapter on becoming friends with people who don't look like you. Your circle of friendship is already quite diverse. You already know the value of that diversity. If that's you, feel free to skim through this chapter or skip it entirely. But there are others of you out there whose friendships are limited to those who share your ethnicity. If that's you, then read on. We had you in mind when we wrote these ideas about friendship.

So, where to start? How about we start at the beginning by thinking about how friendships begin. You'll quickly realize that all friendships



start by having a conversation with someone you don't know. You're at a party. You're at a church fellowship. You're at a freshman orientation. You're on a coffee break during a conference. Your friends are either occupied with someone else or not in attendance. Drink in hand, you decide to walk up to a stranger and start a conversation. For some of us, starting a conversation with a stranger is as easy as taking a bite of pizza. But for the introverts among us, talking to strangers is a big deal. So, this first conversation might not happen in a big crowd. It might happen quietly in the office break room where you cross paths with that new person who works three cubes over from you.

Regardless of the setting, regardless of your introversion or extraversion, every friendship starts with that first conversation. Not every conversation starts a friendship, but no friendship starts without one. That's just the way it works.

In this chapter we want to explore the idea of becoming friends with people who don't look like you. That idea is at the core of this

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***Every friendship  
starts with that first  
conversation.***

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book. And if all friendships start with a conversation, then the key to diversifying your friendships is getting used to the idea of talking to a more diverse group of people. If you're black, it might mean starting to talk to white people. If you're Latino/Latina, it might mean starting to talk to Asian people. You get the point.

It's important, though, not to get ahead of yourself. Going to a party with the expectation that you're going to start a friendship with somebody will likely create a lot of pressure. What we're talking about here is much less daunting. Just go to the party and be open. Decide you're going to enjoy talking to whomever you bump into.

Maybe that'll be a black person. Maybe that'll be a white person. Just relax and have a good time. You might not talk about anything more substantial than the weather or your favorite sports team. But that's fine. The point is you had a pleasant conversation. And that's a start.

This may happen time and again. The conversation may never move past a few moments of enjoyable banter with someone you'll never see again. But when that enjoyable banter is with a person outside of your ethnic group, that's a win. You are slowly lowering the barrier between you and people who don't look like you and becoming acclimated to diversity.

Hopefully, someday that pleasant conversation is going to lead to another pleasant conversation . . . and another . . . and another. And you'll wake up one day and realize that person is no longer just a pleasant person to talk to; that person has become your friend. That's what we want to talk about for the rest of this chapter.

You can be intentional about having a conversation at a party with someone who doesn't look like you. It's solely about making a choice and having the social skills to pleasantly engage with someone for a few minutes. Friendship, however, is a different story.

Friendship is received, not taken. It's a gift, wrapped in interpersonal chemistry and common interests. It's framed by enjoyment, trust, and respect. It's fueled by communication. There are times when it will be hard work. But when it's getting started, it usually feels effortless. This is true whether your new friend looks like you or not.

So, what happens when that person you met at last year's Christmas party, who looks nothing

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like you, has become your friend? Our first response to that question is to caution you

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***Friendship is received,  
not taken.***

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about something. We have said this before, but it bears repeating. Austin Channing Brown, in her book *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, begins by saying, "White people can be exhausting."<sup>1</sup> When asked about this in an interview, she replied, "The goal of our friendship shouldn't be for me to be your teacher. It should be me as your friend."<sup>2</sup> Her point is simple. If your new black friend starts to feel like you've made them your (unpaid) tutor on race relations, it's gonna wear them out. They want to be your friend not your consultant. Austin Channing Brown suggests that, rather than depending exclusively on your black friend to educate you, you should be reading and listening to all sorts of voices in order to understand what it's like to be black in the United States. But if you place that burden exclusively on the shoulders of your black friend, the spontaneity of friendship will be replaced with a stultifying sense of obligation.

As we mentioned earlier, there needs to be a sense of effortlessness to friendship. C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Four Loves*, says friends are

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***If your new black friend starts to feel like you've made them your (unpaid) tutor on race relations, it's gonna wear them out.***

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people who aren't looking at each other but rather looking together at a shared interest, a shared love of something.<sup>3</sup> That's where friendship gets the energy that fuels the effortlessness. If you and I both love sports, movies, or food, it will not be hard to work up some energy to talk about those things. The energy

is already there. We're just thrilled to find someone who loves the same things we do. Our friendship will be easy because it's fueled by the love of a common interest.

This doesn't mean you'll never talk about anything else. It just means that you start with something that's energizing, not manufactured; something that you love to talk about, not something you think you should talk about. By the way, that dreary sense of obligation, often represented by the word *should*, kills friendships. So, if you can avoid "shoulding on yourself," as Brennan Manning used to say, and instead build up a backlog of enjoyable conversations over the weeks and months, you'll discover that something new is starting to grow between you. You are starting to trust one another.

Trust is confidence that someone is for you, that they want you to be happy. It's that conviction that they have your back; that, should the occasion ever arise, they will defend you against your critics. Trust is the assurance that they will tell you the truth not to hurt you but to help you. A friendship may start because of mutual interest, but it will last because of mutual trust.

Trust is the catalyst that allows a friendship to move beyond mutual interest into the realm of mutual discovery. It is the perception that it is safe to explore certain issues and ideas together. Not all friendships make it this far. Some friendships exist within certain boundaries. There is a tacit agreement that "We won't go there. We will stay where it's safe."

But there are other friendships where trust and curiosity carry the conversation beyond what's safe into those unknown areas where differences might live. Those differences are not necessarily disagreements. They're just the result of differing circumstances and experiences.

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***Trust is the catalyst that allows a friendship to move beyond mutual interest into the realm of mutual discovery.***

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When you're friends with someone who doesn't look like you, it's this territory of the unknown that holds the greatest opportunity for life change. It's this territory where someone else's perspectives and experiences can shape your view of the world.

Of course, if I feel like my friend is trying to change me when I encounter these differences, I will probably retreat to the areas where it feels safe. But here's the thing—friends don't change one another because of an agenda. Friends change one another by allowing their friend to get close enough to see who they are, to see what they think and what they feel, and to understand why they think and feel that way. When my friend has the courage to tell me how her past has shaped her present perceptions, that's when her past will start to shape me as well. But the sharing is not done because she wants to change me. It's done because she wants me to know her. And when that person doesn't look like you, that knowledge can be transformative.

Here's a small example of what we're talking about. After we (Teesha and John) had been working together for a while, our conversations began to venture into some sensitive areas regarding racial issues. We took it one step at a time, slowly building up the trust between us. But each time one of us took a small risk, we were met with vulnerability and respect from the other. Nobody got attacked. Nobody got shamed. And there was never a sense that we were trying to change the other. We were trying to understand and be understood by the other. Here's a conversation we had early on in this process.

“So, I have a question for you.”

“Now what?” said Teesha, rolling her eyes.

(Just kidding. Humor plays an integral role in our friendship.)

“Being from SoCal, sometimes I'm not sure how the race thing works here in the South.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for example, sometimes I’m not sure what to call you guys.”

I pointed out that in SoCal “guys” is a gender-neutral term. I quickly added that I was worried about offending people.

“So, should I refer to you as ‘black’ or ‘African American’ or what?”

“Well, technically, I’m not an African American, but I don’t mind being referred to that way,” said Teesha.

“What do you mean?”

“My family’s from Jamaica. I’m Jamaican. If you use the term ‘African American,’ in a sense you’re leaving me and my family out. It doesn’t really account for my Jamaican heritage.”

“So, it’s black?”

“Well, that’s the most inclusive term as it relates to my race. I’m black. So, yes, that’s probably good most of the time. But some black people might prefer ‘African American.’ Black American can also be appropriate.”

“Well, how am I gonna know what people prefer?”

“I suppose you’ll have to ask them.”

“As in we should actually talk about things like this rather than just make assumptions?”

“Exactly.”

“Got it.”

I learned something important about Teesha that day. She identifies as black rather than African American. Who knew? But I learned something else from that conversation as well. The truth is that no black person wants to represent their entire race. They are individuals. They are not icons that represent “their people.” Such thinking, as Austin

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***The truth is that no black person wants to represent their entire race.***

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Channing Brown mentioned, wears them out. It puts pressure on them, the kind of pressure that squelches friendships. But there's something else.

When I attempt to make Teesha a “stand-in for people of color everywhere” rather than becoming familiar with the black community around me, I take a step in the direction of tokenism, as in making only a token effort to understand black peoples' culture and experience. It's that thing where white people cultivate one relationship with one black person in order to create a veneer of diversity. It doesn't really matter who they are. I don't really need to know them. I just need to make sure people see me with them, see that we have “one of them” on our board, in our office, and so on so I can check the “I am okay with black people” box. Tokenism robs people of their humanity and turns them into symbols I am exploiting for my benefit. It is a subtle form of racism.

A person who senses that he is your token will never allow himself to become your friend. And real friends will never allow someone

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***A person who senses  
that he is your token will  
never allow himself to  
become your friend.***

---

who doesn't look like them to become their “token.” I learned all this by reflecting on a two-minute conversation with my friend Teesha. She wasn't trying to change me. She was just trying to let me know who she was. And yet, I was changed. Just a little bit. And only after thinking about

the conversation. But it happened. That is the power of friendship.

As we mentioned earlier, this idea is the foundation upon which this book rests. By asking good questions, listening carefully to one

another, and reflecting on what was said, we are not the same people we were five years ago. It hasn't always been a smooth ride. We have both said things there were offensive and needed an apology. We have both said things that were hard to hear, not because they were insensitive but because they were true. But these occasional difficulties fall on a cushion of trust and respect that has been built up over the years.

Let's sum this up. Friendship changes you. And when you change, your world changes. And when your world changes, *the* world changes. Maybe not much. Maybe not perfectly. But enough to make a tiny difference. And when enough people make a tiny difference, the cumulative effect is not tiny. Some people argue that real change always happens from the top down. That is not always true when we live in a healthy, functioning democracy. In his book *Democracy Matters*, Cornel West says, "The greatest intellectual, moral, political, and spiritual resources in America that may renew the soul and preserve the future of American democracy reside in this multi-racial, rich democratic heritage." West continues:

But we must remember that the basis of democratic leadership is ordinary citizens' desire to take their country back from the hands of corrupted plutocratic and imperial elites. . . . This is what happened in the 1860s, 1890s, 1930s, and 1960s in American history. Just as it looked as if we were about to lose the American democratic experiment . . . in each of these periods a democratic awakening and activist energy emerged to keep our democratic project afloat.<sup>4</sup>

We would suggest that sometimes the spirit of democracy flows through friendships. When those friendships exist between people from different ethnic groups, we have the best chance to participate



in a society that values justice for everyone. It is in that sense that friendships can disrupt racism. But there's one more thing we want to mention.

It's tempting to see this emphasis on friendship as disconnected from the larger mission of the church. When we think of that mission,

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***Friendship changes you.  
And when you change,  
your world changes. And  
when your world changes,  
the world changes.***

---

we tend to focus on issues of cultural relevance such as music, the message, and mission projects. These are very important, but they can't be the exclusive focus of our missional efforts. We think friendship is a crucial component in this area. Two thousand years

ago, Jesus said, "By this all men will know you are my disciples . . ."

He didn't complete the sentence with:

"...if you play the right music."

"...if you have a great communicator on stage."

"...if your website looks fresh and compelling."

"...if you're sending people on mission trips to the right countries."

He completed the sentence by saying: "... if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

The word used here for love is *agape*, a Greek word that doesn't denote a feeling or affection. It denotes a particular stance toward the other. Jesus is talking about the fresh and fearless resolve to seek what is best "for one another."

*Everyone will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another.*

*Everyone will know you are my disciples if you fearlessly pursue what is best, not for yourself, but for the other.*

The implication is as unavoidable as it is clear. How we treat one another is tied to our effort to preach the gospel in that it identifies the ones who represent the gospel in the world.

So, take a minute. Who are the “one anothers” in your life? If they all look like you, we are, in effect, saying the gospel only works under a limited set of circumstances. As a result, we have taken something bigger than we can possibly conceive and shrunk it down to the size of our comfort zone. That makes God look smaller than God really is. And that, my friends, is not what Jesus had in mind.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Does making friends come easily to you, or do you find it to be a significant challenge?
2. Is your circle of friends diverse, or is it pretty homogeneous? Do you feel like your circle of friends is fine the way it is, or are you starting to think about seeing it become more diverse?
3. Why do black people object when a white acquaintance leans too heavily on them to learn about racial issues?
4. What is tokenism? Do you think there's such a thing as "white tokenism," or is "tokenism" mainly a helpful way of examining how some white people treat black people?
5. John and Teesha suggest that when loving one another (as Jesus mentions in John 13:35) occurs only between people who look like each other, we have taken a big idea and shrunk it down to a size much smaller than Jesus intended. Do you agree?