

TEESHA HADRA AND **JOHN HAMBRICK**



BLACK &

DISRUPTING RACISM ONE FRIENDSHIP AT A TIME

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ABINGDON PRESS
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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 Eighteen

NUDGING THE SYSTEM

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

If you pay even a tiny bit of attention to Hollywood, then you have probably heard of Jessica Chastain and Octavia Spencer. You may have seen Octavia Spencer in *Hidden Figures* or *The Shack* and Jessica Chastain in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *the Zookeeper's Wife*. They appeared together in *The Help*. Spencer is black; Chastain is white. During a panel at a recent Sundance Film Festival, Spencer shared a story of how Chastain had nudged the system.¹

Chastain approached Spencer about a project she was producing. When they began discussing Spencer's pay, they agreed to address the disparity in pay between male and female actors. However, Spencer also raised the larger issue of race when she told Chastain that women

of color earn far less than white women in the entertainment industry. Spencer was vulnerable. She put all of her cards on the table and disclosed the relevant figures. Chastain was stunned. She had no idea that this was the reality for women of color. Chastain knew that she had to act because “your silence is your discrimination.” Chastain decided to tie her compensation to Spencer’s so that they would equally divide a larger pot. It turns out that this resulted in Spencer being paid five times her normal salary. Spencer later described Chastain as both a listening friend and a vocal advocate.

Here you have two women, both actresses, both award-winning and critically acclaimed, both famous. But a difference between them is that one is black and one is white, a difference that turned out to have an economic impact. Chastain was first a friend as she listened to Spencer’s experience. When she learned of the pay disparity along racial lines, she did not excuse it away. She did not conjure up any rationalizations about why she deserved more money than Spencer. She saw her friend for who she was, an immensely talented and experienced actress who should be appropriately compensated for her work regardless of her race. She saw an injustice. Once she saw it, she could not unsee it. She had to act. For Chastain, silence was synonymous with complicity, which she could not countenance. Chastain’s friendship compelled her to nudge the system.

We have talked a lot about the importance of entering into relationships with people who don’t look like you. It is an essential step in disrupting racism and living out the gospel. But it is just the first step. Friendship is a foundation for the concrete work of reforming systems and institutions infected with racism. Loving someone who doesn’t look like you will make you see the world differently. Once you see injustice, you cannot unsee it. Love demands that we seek to end the present harm being inflicted on

our brothers and sisters of color and prevent future harm from coming to them.

Consider your sibling or a childhood friend. If someone was bullying them and it was within your power to stop it, would you be justified in doing nothing?

Probably not. You would stand up to the bully on behalf of your sibling or childhood friend. There would likely be broad agreement that this is the right and moral thing to do. Likewise, if someone gave your brother or sister an underinflated football that wouldn't travel as far or as fast

Friendship is a foundation for the concrete work of reforming systems and institutions infected with racism.

at the start of a game, placing them on unequal footing as compared to those on the other team, would you remain silent? Probably not. We predict that you would be pretty upset that someone had treated your sibling so unfairly. It would not take much to convince you that you should step in on behalf of your sibling and do whatever is within your power to ensure that the game is played fairly. This same sense of familial love and responsibility should characterize your relationships with one another, even and especially those who are different from you. If you take seriously the notion that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, then neither inaction nor silence is an acceptable response to racial injustice. Having established a necessary foundation of friendship, the next step is to nudge the system by taking concrete steps to move the country, in large and small ways, toward racial equality.

The first step is to pray. We've said this before. It's easy to skip this step. You may be more concerned about getting the work done,

especially if you are a task-oriented person who loves to-do lists. You want to do something real and concrete to address the pain that you continue to observe. There is a lot of work to be done, and you are not wrong for wanting to get started. However, it is important that the work of nudging the system be done through God and for God's glory. Bringing light to the dark places of racist institutions and communities suffering under the consequences of those institutions is God's work, but we get to play a part. That's where prayer comes in: pray for racial justice, pray for wisdom and guidance, pray for direction in the work, and above all, pray the words of Isaiah in response to the Lord's question about whom to send to proclaim the Lord's message: "Here am I! Send me." (Isaiah 6:8).

After engaging the simple but essential first step of placing God squarely at the center of your work through prayer, you can begin to take stock of your spheres of influence. Jessica Chastain is an actress who has a certain amount of power and influence in the film industry. What are the spaces and places in which you have power and influence? Notice, we did not say "the places where you are in charge." So many of us fall into the trap of thinking that we need a title, money, or fame to lead or effect change. That could not be further from the truth. Scripture is full of stories of God using unlikely people to bring about God's purposes, like Abraham, Mary the mother of Jesus, David, Rahab, and Tamar. We all have the capacity to do good for our neighbor. Proverbs 3:27-28 says, "Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, 'Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it'—when you have it with you." The focus is on the ability to give goodness to our neighbor, not on titles or wealth.

Our spheres of influence are the places where we have power to do good, to give goodness, on behalf of our neighbor. These are

Nudging the System

the places you frequent and the people whom you know and who know you. We all have places where there are opportunities to be a catalyst for change. You need only spend a bit of time reviewing your life in order to identify them. As you take stock of your spheres of influence, consider writing them down. This simple act makes the idea that you have power and influence to effect change on issues of race more concrete and tangible. A few obvious places of influence are your workplace, church, and small group. Add these to your list. But be creative in your thinking. Where do you spend time? Who are your friends and where do they gather? What about your children's school, your softball team, your running club, your book club, your fantasy football league, your neighborhood, or your city? What about your own family? Others of you may have some political influence. You might sense a calling to hop on a plane to work on racial justice at a national level. If that's you, we love that! However, most of us are rooted in particular communities, families, and workplaces. What are the places where you have influence right now, right where you are? That you do not have influence in every space or in seemingly big ways should not be a source of disillusionment. You have influence in some spaces, which means you have the potential to have an impact. Don't forget that many small impacts, when combined, can lead to real, lasting, and substantial change.

Once you've taken stock of the spaces in which you have influence, observe and investigate the racial dynamics in those spaces. When Jessica Chastain began paying attention, she discovered (through her friendship with Octavia Spencer) that black actresses were paid less than their white counterparts. Be aware and be curious about how racism is playing out in your spaces of influence. Who is present? Who seems to be absent? What might account for these observations?

Let's take the school in your community for example. As you seek

greater awareness of the racial dynamics in your spheres of influence, you might ask about the racial makeup of the students, teachers, administrators, and the school board. How do these figures compare with schools in nearby communities? How do these schools compare in other ways, like in their after-school programs, extracurricular activities, availability of technology, age and quality of textbooks, availability of music and art classes, and so on? Then you might ask why these institutions look and function the way they do and how they are funded. Answering these questions may require you to speak with the principal, a member of the school board, or your child's teacher. You may also have to do some internet research and check out a few books at your local library. You may decide to seek out some relevant podcasts or documentaries as well. Learning about how racial dynamics currently function and have functioned in the past are important precursors to any effort to impact change in the system. Focusing your learning in the areas where you have influence brings the reality of racism a little closer to home. It may be difficult, but it can be empowering. As you learn, you are gathering tools that will allow you to tangibly improve the problems you discover.

Ideally, each step of this process will be bathed in prayer as you continually give this work over to God. As Christians, our faith informs all of life. It extends far beyond Sunday morning and includes the work of justice. The world needs an activism rooted in the gospel and driven by the Holy Spirit. Ask how God might be leading you to engage in some of the problems you have identified. As you pray, consider what Scriptures and traditions speak to the issues you found. For example, if you have been looking at racial dynamics in a school in your neighborhood, what does the Bible have to say about children? How did Jesus treat children? Do the policies and procedures of your school oppose Scripture's view of children? You

might also think about identifying people who are already engaged in the work of bringing about racial justice in the spheres you have been researching. Maybe God is leading you to join them in their work.

We have laid out several steps in the process of engaging the work of transforming systems of injustice. However, these don't have to be discrete, linear steps. You will likely move back and forth among these steps multiple times, but the important thing to remember is to intentionally engage each step.

Wherever your prayer and research lead you, we hope it is toward action. Thoughts and prayers matter. They are an important part of the work of undoing the inequities that centuries of racist policies have created. The work begins with thoughts and prayers, but it cannot end there. It is time for Christians to roll up their sleeves and decide that enough is enough. It is time to do the work that the gospel requires of us.

A word of encouragement is probably in order. You may cycle through many emotions while working for justice. There will be days when you feel discouraged.

Doing the work of justice can be emotionally exhausting. While doing this work, you will be further exposed to how deeply and widely people of color have been impacted by racism in America. It is likely that what you see and hear might cause anger or discouragement.

In those moments, remember the suffering of the people you're trying to serve. Then don't give up.

It is time for Christians to roll up their sleeves and decide that enough is enough. It is time to do the work that the gospel requires of us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does nudging the system mean? How did actress Jessica Chastain nudge the system?
2. Do you agree with the underlying assumption of this chapter—that if enough people nudge the system, the system will change?
3. Are you in a place where you might be willing to consider nudging the system? If so, what system are you thinking about nudging?
4. Is nudging the system inherently risky? What kinds of risks might be encountered? How does God figure into your thinking about taking such risks?