

Book Review

Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out

Ruth King

Sounds True, 2018

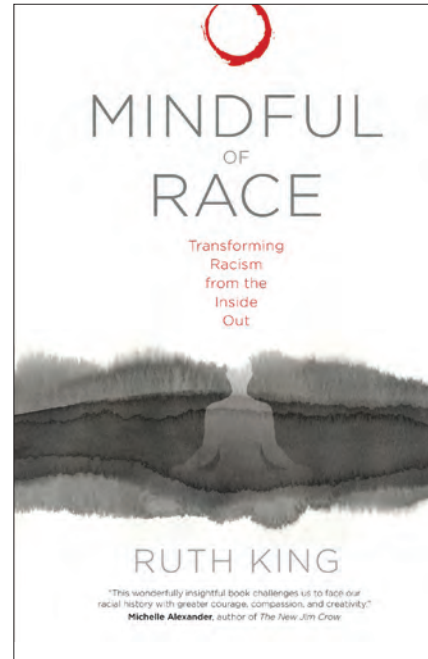
Review by Kendra Fehrer

Ruth King's *Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out* is a thoughtful, tender, and pragmatic guide to how meditation practice can help us wake up and show up in a world suffering from racial injustice. Whatever our personal racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, or class identity, King's work guides us to expand our ability to sit with racial discomfort, keep a spirit of inquiry and openness, and act compassionately in the world.

King wrote much of this book in the final year of Barack Obama's presidency, on the eve of Donald Trump's 2016 election. The aggressive, inflammatory, racialized language of the Trump campaign, along with a resurgence of the white supremacist alt-right was just beginning to surface. In South Carolina, where King wrote, Keith Lamont Scott, a forty-three-year-old African American father of seven, had just been killed by a police officer while waiting in his car to pick up his daughter at school. Less than a year prior, Dylann Roof, a white male and Confederate loyalist, had murdered nine African Americans in a historic black church in downtown Charleston.

Since 2016, race relations in the United States have come to a head, catalyzed by a number of high-profile killings of African American civilians by police officers. The United States has a long history of racism and racial injustice, dating back to the transportation and enslavement of African peoples, as well as the displacement and genocide of native peoples, both of which ushered in the founding of our country. Federal and state policies continued to discriminate against black Americans, restricting everything from voting rights to educational access to financial and lending practices. Our criminal justice system also reflects this inequity; people of color are disproportionately more likely than their white peers to be pulled over while driving, targeted for harsher sentences, and incarcerated. (For more on race in the criminal justice system see www.sentencingproject.org.)

King situates her book as a response to this painful context. King is a longtime meditator and teacher in the Insight Meditation tradition, and has led diversity training for corporations, nonprofits, and religious communities for decades. She also draws on her personal experience as an African-American woman, lesbian, mother, and grandmother, raised in Los Angeles in the 1960s. I, the reviewer, am a white woman, mother, educator, and



social science researcher, raised in the San Francisco Bay Area of the 1980s. As a long-time social justice activist, I have spent many years reflecting on race, racism, white privilege, and the systems of inequality that so deeply harm our society. As a reader, I came to this book seeking insight into how meditation practice could help me grapple with the heartbreaking events of 2020.

King begins her book by framing racism as a heart disease. Race and racism cut to our very essence, our ability to see and act clearly, without hindrance, to relieve suffering. King challenges us to see “the world’s heart is on fire and race is at its core.” The first part of the book makes visible to the reader the pernicious and often unseen ways that race shapes our individual, group, and societal experiences. For readers just entering their journey of understanding of racial dynamics in the United States, these chapters will be illuminating and perhaps challenging. For those already engaged in the work of dismantling racism, they will be a refreshing take on elucidating the mechanisms of racism through a dharma lens.

Chapter 4 is especially compelling, as King details the “Six Hindrances to Racial Harmony.” The chapter shines light on common mental patterns that create “habits of harm.” One habit that King illuminates is

the propensity of white people to see racial incidents as individual encounters (“stars”), rather than part of a broader pattern of systemic racism (“constellations”). King describes how two participants—one white, one black—in a workshop she attended reacted to a video showing the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American man, by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. While both participants were outraged, the white participant read the event as a horrific and unfortunate incident (a “star of harm”), whereas the black participant read that same event as part of a broader pattern of violence against blacks (a “constellation of harm”).

King beckons the reader—especially those of us insulated by racial privilege—to become aware of these racial patterns of harm. “It’s not just a handful of police killing black bodies that is the pattern. Although we could point fingers at the individual police officers, it is the system that fails us. . . . The constellation of harm here is embedded in the system that condones such behavior as normative. . . . These struggles interconnect; they are not separate.” For white people, becoming aware of this individualized way of thinking as part of our “mental programming” is part of waking up to race.

King reminds her audience, “Some white readers may feel put upon by this discussion, and some people of color may feel like they’ve heard this all before or that they are being painted as a victim. Keep in mind that the hindrances we’re looking at speak more to racial group dynamics, not so much to individual actions. They are meant to stimulate deeper inquiry. When we think we know or we don’t want to know, we stop being mindful, and by so doing, we live with a heart disease.”

Part 2 of the book offers meditation and mindfulness tools for dealing with racial distress, no matter our position. Whether one is a white person uncomfortable with confronting their role in structural racism for the first time, or a person of color healing from the injury of repeated racial harm, mindfulness meditation practice can help us “slow down and investigate our experiences with care and wise attention.”

King’s chapter on kindness practice is particularly inspiring. She writes, “We all have ways of protecting ourselves from racial harm. We may strike out, walk out, or numb out, depending on the situation. Yet underneath all of our actions . . . is a shared and deep desire for kindness—to both offer it and receive it. We all wish to be able to stand in the center of racial ignorance and distress without parking our hearts at the door.” King guides the reader through practices to help embrace racial fear and distress with a warm and open heart. By creating space for the full range of our experience, we minimize escalation and distortion, allowing ourselves to investigate and digest our experience, in turn paving

the way for wise and compassionate action. For practitioners in the Kwan Um School, this invitation to “expand the container,” without pushing away or holding on to our experience, should sound familiar.

In the final part of the book, King offers a roadmap for taking wise and compassionate action. “As you become more mindful of race, there is a social responsibility you can’t easily escape. For example, if you are doing harm, you feel the need to put a stop to it. If you see someone else doing harm, you feel the need to stop them. If you see systems at work that harm others or that harm the planet, you feel the need to join with others to make sure the harm stops.” The final chapters of the book walk the reader through a series of potential actions, ranging from the intimate and personal (for example, “keeping kindness and non-harming at the forefront of our awareness”) to the community-facing (taking political action, for example, or forming a racial affinity group).

King has a chapter with specific suggestions for how white people can use their racial privilege to support racial justice, and another on how people of color can work together to support each other in healing from racial trauma. King challenges white readers to become aware of their own racial identity, talk with children about what it means to be a white American, and use their positions of leadership and privilege to foment culture change in their organizations—not as a special “diversity” initiative, but rather, to transform the values, beliefs, policies, and structures needed to create more equitable and inclusive organizations. King’s invitation for readers of color focuses on attending to internalized oppression, prioritizing self-care and healing, choosing strategically when to engage in challenging bias and harm, and fostering resilience in children.

King also highlights the importance of creating safe spaces for engaging in difficult conversations around race in our personal, work, and community lives. She offers concrete tools to support such conversations.

While there are many excellent books on Buddhism and race, King’s book is particularly aligned with the teachings of our school. Zen Master Seung Sahn’s teachings prod us to wake up, see clearly what is in front of us, and respond with compassion: *Who am I? What is this? How can I help?* King’s book attunes these questions to the context of race and racial injustice today. Who am I, in this racialized world? How might my preconceptions be distorting my views? How can I keep an open heart in the face of discomfort? How can I show up to help this world? *Mindful of Race* offers a warm, practical, and insightful field guide to help us do just that. Our school has a famous kong-an: The whole universe is on fire; through what kind of samadhi can you escape being burned? King gives us both an invitation and a challenge to step into the fire. ♦