

I'm Still Here by Austin Brown

A Reading Guide

When Jill Vanderwal asked me to work with her in reading and writing questions about *I'm Still Here* by Austin Channing Brown, I enthusiastically replied “yes”! However, I began to feel a bit anxious in wondering what I was going to learn. My interest in exploring my own race and upbringing was something I had already begun doing. As I began reading more on racial and social issues, going to conferences, and listening to podcasts, it became clear to me that I was living in a bubble. I questioned the responsibility I had, if any, in my day to day thoughts and actions regarding my place in my world. I retired from teaching, and in my classroom I had students of color. I felt like I got along with them very well and brought an un-bias to the classroom and a school where every faculty member was white and the majority of the student population was white. As I continue to learn about the challenges a person of color faces every day it was clear to me that I don't face those challenges. My initial reflection had me feeling guilty that I was a white woman of privilege.

As my studies continue, I realize that guilt doesn't help me in looking inside or outside myself. It has been a constant prayer for me to embrace my gratefulness in the life I was given, but think about ways I can work towards showing understanding, compassion, empathy and grace to people of color. I will never have their experience, but I can listen and learn from their stories. We all have stories and those are important to hear, no matter how wonderful or how heart wrenching they are. So, here we go together on this journey of listening, understanding, loving, and learning how to embrace all people of God regardless of their upbringing, education, social or economic status, or the color of their skin. If it is uncomfortable and some of Ms. Brown's stories cause a feeling somewhere in you that you didn't know was there, please wrestle with it. Pray about it. Listen to it. Question it. Grow from it. Pray about it, again.

May this be a safe place where we can openly talk and learn with no judgement, no fear, no shame. May it be an opportunity to open our hearts and minds towards a new understanding and the responsibility we have as we learn. Let it be a journey of love and a shift in what it truly means to be a people of God.

Chapter 1: *White People are Exhausting*

Question to begin with:

1. Is there a story behind the name you were given?
2. Have you ever had any concern when filling out a job application?
3. Have you ever felt you had to “stick up” for your race? When? How? What was, if any, the outcome?

4. Do you know a person(s) of color? How do you know them? Are you comfortable to question yourself on any stereotype you think you may have bubbling beneath the surface in regards to people of color? Do you have any observation about that?
5. On page 21, Ms. Brown writes, "*The Church I love has been opporessor as often as it has been the champion of the oppressed. I can't let go of my belief in Church - in a universal body of belonging, in a community that reaches toward love in a world so often filled with hate. I continue to be drawn toward the collective participation of seeking good, even when that means critiquing the institution I love for its commitment to whiteness*". How do you feel about that statement?
6. Who is Jesus to you? What color is Jesus?

Chapter 2: Playing Spades

1. During your education, what did your teachers look like? Do you remember when/if you had an African American teacher? When and where was it?
2. When you go to a store, what is your shopping experience like? Have you ever felt uncomfortable in a store? Why or why not?
3. How often are you in a place where everyone looks like you?
4. What brings you joy when you attend a church service? Do you feel like you belong? What made you choose First Presbyterian as a place to worship? Have you ever visited a congregation that does not look like you? If so, what was your experience like?

Chapter 3: The Other Side of Harmony

Harmony (p.41): *The absence of outright conflict*

1. Do you take any steps in your life to create harmony? What are some examples?
2. How do you handle conflict?
3. Do you remember your history classes? Was there a period in history that you found interesting? Why or why not? Who were some of the heroes you learned about?
4. On page 46, the poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar reads:

*Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.*

What does this poem mean to you? Have you ever felt like you had to wear a "mask"? Have you ever felt the need to hide from who you are or what you believe? What are some examples? Have you ever been in a situation where you were the minority? Elaborate on that situation and how you felt.

4. What does affirmative action mean to you?

Chapter 4: Ain't No Friends Here

1. "My white teachers had an unspoken commitment to the belief that *we are all the same*, a default setting that masked for them how often white culture bled into the curriculum". Page 53. What are your thoughts on that sentence?
2. What do you know about:
 - a. Plantations
 - b. Chattel
 - c. Dred Scott
 - d. Middle Passage
 - e. Slave codes
 - f. Jim Crow
 - g. Slavery
 - h. Lynching
3. Beginning on page 54, Ms. Brown tells the story about the three-day journey she took while in college, down South on a trip called Sankofa. The purpose was to explore Black history in partnership with another student. There were about twenty pairs of students, mostly comprising one Black and one white student. Their first stop was at a plantation in Louisiana. The next stop was at a museum that consisted of only one exhibit - a history of lynching. The misunderstanding and tension between the Black and white students had mounted during the trip. (Please read the story to capture the essence of what was happening on the bus and have your own reaction with the reading). In the end, a white student said 9 words that Ms. Brown said changed her life. They were "*Doing nothing is no longer an option for me.*"
 - a. Have you ever learned or experienced something that resonated so strongly inside of you that you couldn't avoid it? What was it? How did you deal with it?
4. We are bombarded with news on television, radio, social media, newspapers, twitter When watching or reading the news, the challenge is to watch or read it with a critical eye. Analyze the news segments. Does the news show more people of color committing crimes? How are they pictured? What kind of language is used in describing the criminal? Who are the newscasters? Where are the sources for the story from? Is there any underlying bias you can detect?

Chapter 5: Whiteness at Work

1. In your place of employment, are there Black people? What positions do they hold? Do you have a Black person you work closely with? How do you think *their* experience is working with you or in the place you work?
2. Have you ever dissected your day as closely as Ms. Brown does through pages 71-76? Is there anything in your day that parallels hers? Can you get a sense of the constant

self-evaluation she goes through being a Black woman in a white workplace? What are your thoughts on that?

3. Have you ever thought that if you don't like something (job, seat, school, classroom, schedule, etc.), that you can just leave it and get something different? Where does that thinking originate from for you? Have you ever thought about this as being a privilege?

Interlude: Why I love being a Black Girl

Reflection: Pray before you read this. Pray for an open heart and mind towards Ms. Brown's writing. Pray for her value, her humanity, her brilliance, her family, her creativity, her strength, the demands she makes of herself and others, the beautiful color of her skin, her language, her sense of community, her beauty, her braids, and all of those that were instrumental in being with her who gave her strength on her journey.

Chapter 6: White Fragility

White fragility ignores the personhood of people of color and instead makes the feelings of whiteness the most important thing.

JS: This chapter was difficult to write questions on. The stories are powerful and made me look at the excuses made when defending white privilege and misunderstanding Black competency.

Chapter 7: Nice White People

1. What is your definition of *racism*?
2. Relational Defense is when a white person, rather than confess or seek transformation when caught in a racist act, defends their "goodness" by appealing to the relationships of those who know them (i.e.: *My family and friends know my heart. They will tell you I couldn't be racist. Or, I have a Black spouse/child/friend. I don't have a racist bone in my body. Or, I am not racist! Just ask (blank) She knows me*). Have you ever witnessed this for yourself or others? How does this idea settle within you?
3. What responsibility do you want to take in understanding the Black race better? What are you going to do differently?

Chapter 8: The Story We Tell

1. What do you know about America's racial history? Where does that knowledge come from?
2. As a nation, do you believe we have confronted the humanity, the emotions, the heartbeats of the multiple generations, who were born into slavery and died in it, who never tasted freedom of America's land? Do you think white people need to confront that? Why or why not?
3. Does belief in Black inferiority still live in the minds and hearts of white people today? Wrestle with that one.
4. What do you think the impact on you, your children, your grandchildren, your grandparents, your aunts, uncles and cousins, your friends, your teacher, your minister, would be if you saw slanderous signs about all of you, were spit on, were denied access to a seat in a restaurant, were hosed down, were shoved and pushed, had dogs chase you, were not welcome on a **daily basis**, because you had white skin?
5. On pages 116-117, Ms. Brown writes: "Ultimately, the reason we have not yet told the truth about this history of Black and white America is that telling an ordered history of this nation would mean finally naming America's commitment to violent, abusive, exploitative, immoral white supremacy, which seeks the absolute control of Black bodies. It would mean doing something about it."
 - a. How long will it be before we finally choose to connect all the dots?
 - b. How long before we confess the history of racism embedded in our systems of housing, education, health, criminal justice, and more?
 - c. How long before we dig to the root?
6. What do you think the greatest fear is for white people to address these issues?
7. In addressing these issues, what responsibility does the Church have?
8. Is it not the work of the Holy Spirit to illuminate truth and inspire transformation? (It's haunting but it's holy. P 118)

Interlude: How to Survive Racism in an Organization that claims to be Antiracist

Read the 10 points Ms. Brown writes on this.

Can you share this with your organization? Why or why not?

Chapter 10: The Ritual of Fear

1. Have you ever had the fear that you, or your parent, or your child, won't make it safely home from work or school? Have you ever had the fear that you will be wrongly accused by a police officer who misunderstood you for someone else, or didn't treat you fairly? Have you ever had the fear that you would be shot when you go about your day? Have you ever had the fear that you will be looked at with imperfection if your child is rude or disrespectful, even when they make mistakes? Have you ever had the fear that you will not be recognized as a fellow human being that has a place in the world?
2. What does fear feel like to you?

Chapter 11: A God for the Accused

1. From Nixon to Clinton, the Presidents began a “War on Drugs”. President Clinton signed an act that called for mandatory minimums for multiple drug offenses (three strikes and you are out). Do you think this helped or hurt race relations in the U.S.? Why or why not?
2. What is a criminal?
3. Was Jesus a criminal?

Chapter 12: We’re Still Here

1. What is Black Lives Matter? How and why did it begin?
2. Do you think we as Americans, have made progress in racial issues? Explain your thoughts.
3. Who are: Cynthia Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Myra Thompson?
 - a. What prayer can you offer for their friends, family and church?

Interlude: A Letter to my Son

Read the letter Ms. Brown writes to her son while in the womb. What is a letter you would write your child in the womb? (Men, you can still write a letter, too!) Is there a difference for what you would write to your child than what Ms. Brown wrote? If so, what is that difference?

Chapter 13: Justice then Reconciliation

1. What is Racial Reconciliation?
2. What are some strategies/thoughts/actions you can take in Racial Reconciliation?

Chapter 14: Standing in the Shadow of Hope

1. How do you explain hope?
2. Do you have hope in your life? Where does it come from?
3. What is left when hope is gone?

Acknowledgements

Read the Acknowledgements and all of the people Ms. Brown thanks at the end of her book. Take in the support and love she received in writing this demanding book. Feel the love she has for her supportive husband and his for her.

Other reading/listening recommendations from JS:

- *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James H. Cone
- *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Delores S. Williams
- *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander
- *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson
- *The Color of Law*, Richard Rothstein
- *Waking Up White*, Debby Irving
- *13th*: Netflix Documentary
- *Codeswitch*: NPR Podcast