

***Demystifying Diversity: Embracing
Our Shared Humanity***
Book & Workbook

By Daralyse Lyons

PREFACE & CHAPTER 1

Preface

“Without a willingness to confront the human capacity for hatred, we ensure that persecution and dehumanization will continue”

Daralyse Lyons, author and co-creator of
the *Demystifying Diversity Podcast*

I was at the Boys & Girls Club’s after school program, hanging out on the grass by the side of the building, when I overheard a White girl call a Black boy the N-word.

I stormed over to where they were standing. “Did you hear what she called you?”

The boy hung his baseball-capped head.

“Well... What are you gonna do about it?” I wasn’t trying to further intimidate a victim, but I couldn’t let the girl get away with hate speech. I was an eleven-year-old advocate for justice.

Nicole.

I turned to face her.

Nicole went to Western Middle School, like me. We were in the same grade. She was considerably shorter. The boy must’ve gone to Eastern or Central, one of the other two Greenwich Middle schools because he and I didn’t know each other. And Greenwich was the sort of town where kids of color who went to the same school knew each other. There were so few of us. Unfortunately, due to what ensued, the boy and I would never have the opportunity to be formally introduced.

Nicole elongated herself to her full four-feet, three-inches and planted her hands on her nonexistent hips. She had stringy, mousy-brown hair that dangled to her shoulders, a pinched face—like a Doberman’s—and beady blue eyes. “Yeah.” She sneered. “What’re you gonna do about it, *nigger*?”

The brim of the boy’s hat remained pointed at the ground. “Nothing. I can’t hit a girl.”

I knew that, if I wanted to remain on the right side of justice, I couldn’t stay a bystander.

“Maybe you can’t, but I can!” I delivered an unexpected fist to the gut.

(To this day, that punch remains the only one I’ve ever thrown—unless you count my brief stint with Billy Blanks Tae-Bo videos, or the six weeks I spent taking Wing Chun lessons).

Before she could react, I leapt on top of her, slapping, clawing, and pulling while she attempted to get away. “Stop! Ow! That hurts! HELP!”

She was crying out, yet she had been the one to inflict the more painful injury.

“You racist pig!” I screamed.

It took three teenage staff members to pull me off and drag me inside to the Program Director’s office.

The Program Director, Don, was tall and kind with soft, chestnut eyes and lips that smiled far more often than they frowned. After I told him my side of the story, he sat for several seconds, unmoving. It was as if he wanted to react one way, but knew he had to respond another. What seemed like minutes (but was probably only seconds) later, he instructed me to sit on the bench in the hall outside his office while he called my mom at work.

The hallway was brightly lit and cheery, adorned with children’s finger paintings. I stared at a red handprint on yellow construction paper. I didn’t quite know how to feel. I wasn’t sorry, but I that didn’t mean I welcomed whatever punishment awaited.

Mom arrived ten minutes later (two hours before the scheduled dismissal time) to find me still sitting in the hall. By then, Don had interrogated Nicole. He’d gone outside to question her. He and the other staff must’ve figured that, if they brought her inside, I’d have finished what I started—after she started what she started.

After speaking with my racist peer, Don had remained outside, so he was there to meet my mom, and give her a quick debriefing before the two of them walked in together.

“Dara...” Mom said.

Don held his office door open. Mom and I preceded him inside. He followed, gently closing the door, shutting out any possibility of interruption or intrusion.

“What’s this about you calling a girl a racist word?” Mom’s expression telegraphed her confusion.

“I didn’t call her a racist word.”

Don looked from me and my burnished skin to my ivory-complected mother, then back to me again. “Nicole said you did.”

“Nicole’s a liar!”

“What’d she say Dara called her?” Mom wanted to know.

The Program Director’s face flushed as he repeated what Nicole had said I’d said. “White trash.”

“Dara! Did you say that?”

“No! I would never say that. You’re White. I’m part White. I called her a racist pig.”

I explained about Nicole’s use of the N-word, and how the boy’s unwillingness to hit a girl hadn’t precluded me from hitting her on his behalf.

Mom let my version of events sink in. “Oh,” she said. And then, “that makes more sense.”

“Racism is *wrong*,” Don told us both, “and Nicole will be punished. But I can’t ignore the fact that Dara assaulted her.”

My mom was always a bottom-line-this-for-me person. “So... What’s Dara’s punishment?”

“She’ll be banned from the Boys & Girls Club for the next week.”

Mom didn’t ask for a partial refund—which was saying a lot considering her tight single-parent budget and her love of bargaining. She thanked the Program Director for his time and told him she appreciated and supported his need to take action. Then, she took my hand and led me outside, to her gold Honda. The car was the same color as my skin in the summer.

“Are you mad?” I asked after we’d climbed inside.

“Not at all,” she replied. “Dara, I am super proud of you.”

In the twenty-six years since being sent home from the Boys & Girls Club, I’ve continued to be an advocate for justice, but my approach has changed. I’ve come to the conclusion that I want to make more of an impact than a punch. Although I believe there’s a time and place for violence, I don’t think the systems that perpetuate prejudice can be dismantled without engaging with others in meaningful and empathetic ways.

As a Biracial¹ person, I exist in the center of the binaries of Blackness and Whiteness and I hate that so many other people can’t seem to embrace both races simultaneously. I’m doing what I can to change that. In 2018, I published a children’s book about loving my Biracial identity and, in 2019, I was interviewed on “Community Voices,” a local cable TV show, about my understanding of race. The woman who interviewed me, AnnaMarie Jones, is Biracial, like me. She loved my message of acceptance and empowerment and we became immediate friends. We’d each been longing to meet someone with a similar spectrum understanding of race. Not long after our

¹ Although most publications do not capitalize the word Biracial, I have elected to do so. It is now standard practice to capitalize races as proper nouns and because I see racial and ethnic identity as existing within a spectrum, it feels important to acknowledge Biraciality as a distinct and separate experience, worthy of the same recognition as any other racial affiliation or identity.

“Community Voices” interview, AnnaMarie called to ask if I wanted to work on a project together.

Her initial idea had been to center our project around anti-racism advocacy, but I wanted to create something more expansive and inclusive.

“I’m in!” I said. “But only if we can find a way to amplify as many marginalized voices as possible.”

And, just like that, the *Demystifying Diversity Podcast* was born. I interviewed over 100 individuals and collected more than 100 hours of audio.

There are a lot of -isms and -phobias that go beyond racism and I want to be part of a movement towards equity and inclusion for every human, not just people with whom I share the same racial lineage. Whoever you are, you’ve likely witnessed, participated in, or been the victim of some form of discriminatory behavior. It might’ve had to do with race, body shape, gender, religion, or any of the many identity markers that people use to justify their mistreatment of one another.

Through independent research, listening to others, and my own personal experiences, I’ve become all too aware of the devastating impact of othering (classifying an individual or group of individuals as fundamentally different from one’s self). I’ve come to believe that the only way to overcome dehumanization is to become aware that we all have complex and intersecting identities, to acknowledge the unique gifts that arise from our differences, and to embrace our shared humanity.

I’ve come to believe that we affect ourselves and each other in three ways:

1. We help.
2. We hurt.
3. We do nothing, remaining un-invested and indifferent.

To help can take a number of forms but any positive contribution requires engagement and empathy. To hurt is also active. It necessitates that we become agents of aggression and dehumanization. Doing nothing is also a form of hurt, but I wanted to create a distinction between active and passive perpetration. By no means does this excuse inaction. On the contrary! It is often those who do nothing who know better and could affect positive change, if only they would be willing to step into the ally zone.

One of my interviews was with Alisa Kraut, Assistant Curator at the National Museum of American Jewish History. The granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, Alisa’s father was born in a displaced persons’ camp. Unsurprisingly, she had a lot to say about the importance of being invested in the lives, and therefore the deaths, of strangers. She told me that, as human beings, “We’re Venn diagrams in Venn

diagrams. And so, if you can't find those connections, it means you're not looking."

If you're a human being in this world, you have areas of overlap with people you imagine to be different than yourself. The more we start looking for similarities, the more invested we become. Suddenly, strangers are no longer strange. They are just another iteration of ourselves.

I'm not saying we need to sit around singing Kumbaya, or that we're all one. I'm simply pointing out that discrimination thrives on separation. At the same time, when it comes to the issue of othering, none of us are blameless.

Dr. Howard Stevenson, Constance Clayton Professor of Urban Education and Executive Director of the Racial Empowerment Collaborative, said something that I continue to find useful as I search for commonalities and connections between those of whom I might initially have been suspicious: "the reality is, we can sometimes be initiators ourselves, so you can be both initiator and 'victim.'"

It is not possible to be a human in this world without sometimes displaying the ignorance that lurks on the other side of understanding. Yet, this feels like an especially divisive time to be alive. Especially in America. Since the 2016 election, othering has become so pervasive that it's no longer surprising. The nation's 45th president has been driving a lot of this discrimination and, when he hasn't been instigating it, he's been encouraging and supporting it.

Trump has admitted to grabbing women "by the pussy," mocked a reporter with disabilities, heckled a 12-year-old boy with cerebral palsy, pledged to ban all Muslims from entering the United States, declared that Mexican immigrants are criminals and advocated "building a wall to keep them out," refused to condemn White supremacists, condoned the beating of Black Lives Matter protestors and a homeless Latinx man, stereotyped Jews, made disparaging comments about women based on age and weight, and treated minorities as monoliths—making comments about "the Blacks," "the Mexicans," "the gays," "the Muslims," and "the Hispanics."

To enumerate each of Trump's abuses would be a book in and of itself. (And many such books exist.) Trump didn't create discrimination. He merely stoked the flames of a preexisting fire.

Sadly, America is not the land of freedom, liberty, and individual agency it purports to be. Salaah Muhammad, activist, podcaster, and disruptor, referred to slavery as "the original sin" of our country. I would label it the second sin, after the systematic annihilation of indigenous people. This nation began with the near eradication of Native Americans and indigenous peoples then quickly moved into a nearly 400-year long era of the enslavement of those who happened to have been born Black or Brown.

One of the reasons raced-based persecution has been so pervasive in America and elsewhere is that it capitalizes on visible difference, but early Americans did not confine themselves to persecuting people of color. Just look at the Salem Witch Trials and you'll see how those who came to this country wanting to escape religious persecution morphed from victims to victimizers in an all-too-common manifestation, a manifestation which occurs culturally, societally, and individually.

In her February 2010 publication, "The 'Monster' in All of Us: When Victims Become Perpetrators," feminist, defense attorney, and law professor, Abbe Smith writes:

Although victims do not always become perpetrators, a truism repeated by prosecutors at sentencing as if it were a profound revelation never before put into words, it is the rare serious perpetrator who was not also a victim. Of course, there are people who commit crime out of self-indulgence, self-interest, meanness, or madness. But among those who have committed serious crime, it is the rare perpetrator who has not also suffered. It is the rare death row inmate whose life does not read like a case study of extreme deprivation and abuse. It is the rare juvenile incarcerated in an adult prison for rape or murder who has had anything other than the cruelest of childhoods. As a career indigent criminal defense lawyer, I live in the world of victims turned-perpetrators. I am often more surprised by my damaged clients who do not commit serious, violent crimes than by those who do. Some might say that this is strange work for a feminist; I spend my time representing mostly men and boys accused of crime and violence, often against women. But, to me, it is all of a piece.

Smith understands that perpetration leads to pain and pain leads to more perpetration. Trauma is cyclical. Standing for human rights requires us to develop our capacity for empathy and to search out the causes that create conditions of violence and victimization. If we don't intervene in restorative and reparative ways, hurt people are likely to hurt other people.

In order to embrace diversity, it's essential to look at the intersectionality of identity and the interconnected nature of oppression.

Much of the information being released into the world today about diversity and inclusion tends to focus on a specific subgroup. There are books, podcasts, and TV shows about the Black Lives Matter movement, the history of slavery, Islamophobia, the mistreatment of individuals with disabilities, weight-based bullying, and all the other topics I present on the *Demystifying Diversity Podcast* and within these pages. While I am grateful for all of this important work, I want to take a broader perspective. By providing an expansive and inclusive look at

the experiences of many (but certainly not all) marginalized members of society, I hope to challenge each of us to not only examine our prejudices but to practice empathy for those we assume to be different than ourselves.

Because knowledge without application almost never makes a tangible impact, this book is accompanied by a workbook that includes chapter-by-chapter exercises. Although the workbook is by no means compulsory reading, I invite you to engage with this work and I promise that, if you do, you will expand your capacity to love others and, invariably, that will enable you to more fully love yourself.

If you have the companion *Demystifying Diversity Workbook*, please turn to the exercises for the Preface and start them. Return to Chapter 1 in this book when you have completed them.

Exercises for Preface

Exercise P-1: In the space provided below, answer the following questions: What's the reason you bought this book? If someone else bought it for you, why did they? Did you discuss their reasoning? How did that conversation make you feel?

Exercise P-2: What do you think would change about your life if you learned about people whose identity markers include cultures, religions, races, sexual orientations, body shapes, and physical and/or cognitive abilities other than your own?

Exercise P-3: What do you want people to know about you that they generally wouldn't realize based on your visible or invisible identity markers?

Exercise P-4: Take the Diversity Pledge

If you can honestly agree to the following pledge, sign and date below.

<p>Diversity Pledge</p> <p>In signing this, I own and acknowledge that I have been part of the problem of pervasive othering that is occurring within the world. I have made judgments about people I did not know based on my own faulty assumptions. I cannot promise to let go of all my prejudice, privilege and/or self-important superiority, but I can and will keep an open mind as I move forward on this journey of growth and exploration. It is only by accepting that I have been part of the problem that I can become part of the solution.</p> <p>Signed _____</p> <p>Date _____</p>

1

Diversity and Me: Early Experiences

“You may be hurting because someone has othered you, yet, whether you were aware of it or not, it’s likely that you’ve othered someone else. With empathy and understanding, we can move beyond fear, suspicion, and discrimination into healing, hope, and love.”

Daralyse Lyons, author and co-creator of
the *Demystifying Diversity Podcast*

Smoke started wafting up from the back of my head.

My mom yelped and threw the steaming metal hot comb into the kitchen sink. It rattled around the empty silver basin. It was a good thing there weren’t any dishes inside, but we generally ate take-out (straight out of the container or off of paper plates) so unwashed dishes were a rarity.

I reached up and touched the nape of my neck. A chunk of singed golden lamb’s wool fell to the floor. Luckily, my hair was so thick entire segments of it could go missing without anyone noticing.

Mom skimmed the instructions. “Oh! I should’ve let the hot comb cool.”

I shook my still-smoking head.

“How about a French braid?” Mom suggested.

It couldn’t have been easy for a White suburbanite raising a Biracial child in Greenwich, Connecticut—especially as a single parent—but Sunny Lyons then, Taylor now, never subscribed to other people’s expectations. When, at seven months pregnant, she discovered that my dad was cheating, she left him. She taught me, by word and by example, that, if anyone mistreated you, you had the right to stand up for yourself.

Who cared if friends or family (or even the ever-present specter of society) second-guessed her ability as a White woman to raise a half-Black daughter? She never doubted herself. And, if people looked at us

when we went out, she'd say, "They're staring because you're unique and beautiful."

When I was six or seven, Mom took me to one of my classmate's birthday parties. Two White girls who looked as if they might be around the same age as me approached us.

The one with the blonde pigtails greeted me not with a standard "hello" or "how are you?" but by asking "Are you Black?"

I smiled. "Half Black, and half White."

"Oh," she replied. "Want to play?"

"Yeah," I agreed.

The three of us skipped away together.

I grew up believing that conversations about race could begin from a space of curiosity and connection and my existence as someone who has always claimed equal affiliation with both my Black and White heritage has offered me an entry into a spectrum of different spaces.

In 2018, I published a children's book about my Biracial identity. I'd already published a wide array of adult titles and I was advised that I should differentiate that work from my kids' books by writing *I'm Mixed!* under a pseudonym. I selected Maggy Williams, an amalgamation of my favorite aunt's first name, and my grandfather's middle name (both of them died before the book came out and I wanted to pay tribute to their importance in my life). After publishing the book, I went to various schools, libraries and organizations to read *I'm Mixed!* and speak about embracing all aspects of ourselves and each other. One of the places I went was the same Boys & Girls Club where I once beat up a White girl for calling a Black boy the N-word.

Don, the former Program Director, still worked there, although he'd been promoted several times. "I was so excited to hear about your book," he said when he saw me. We gave each other a huge hug and, when we pulled apart, he told me "I'm proud of you."

It had all come full-circle for me. Unfortunately, the world hasn't fundamentally changed. I still see examples of prejudice everywhere. Although I'm unlikely to throw any physical punches, I still strive to stand up for others. So many people are in need of empathy, advocacy, and allyship because so many others are so hurtful.

During one of my interviews, Dennis Moritz, Jewish poet and playwright, said something that perfectly encompasses what this project has taught me: "I don't think you can be an honest observer of the human condition without being overwhelmed at times by the cruelty that gets visited on people. It seems to me to be so counter to who we are. We're beautiful. Every one of us is beautiful. There is nothing like a human being in this world that we experience. We are remarkable."

Confronting the human capacity for evil doesn't mean losing sight of the beauty and resilience within each of us. In fact, acknowledging both

is the only foundation from which to begin the process of repairing the world.

Kinsukuroi, the ancient Japanese art of repairing broken pottery, is a technique that offers a powerful metaphor for my work as an advocate for rights, justice, equality, diversity and inclusion. The Kinsukuroi artist takes broken objects and puts them back together using adhesive that has been infused with precious metals such as silver, platinum, and gold. By treating breakage as part of the item's ever-evolving process, it's always moving towards beauty while honoring brokenness. With the process that you'll be invited to enter into as you read this book and do the exercises in the suggested workbook, you'll be acknowledging breakage even as you look for areas of adhesion.

There is a passage in *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles* by Marianne Williamson that recognizes the internal human struggle and calls us to be better, for ourselves and for others:

As I interpret the *Course [In Miracles]*, 'our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us.' We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

It's not always easy to walk in our light. It is, however, essential to learn to do if we want to stand for equality, justice, liberty, and love. It's even more essential that we embrace the premise that every other human also has a light within them and none of us are more valuable than any other.

Not every person, or even every demographic, is represented in these pages. Nevertheless, you will find a multitude of different stories and will be able to relate to at least some of the wide-ranging human experiences shared within this book. As you read, and as you work through the accompanying workbook, I urge you to let yourself expand beyond the limits of what you think you know about yourself and others. It's okay to feel broken at times. In fact, I hope you do. It's part of the process and it's within the cracks that you'll find yourself most receptive to the growth that is adhesive—the human connection that is gold.

If you have the companion *Demystifying Diversity Workbook*, please turn to the exercises for Chapter 1 and start them. Return to Chapter 2 in this book when you have completed them.

Exercises for Chapter 1 – Diversity and Me: Early Experiences

Exercise 1-1: It has been said that the eyes are a window into the soul, yet we don't often make eye-contact with others. We almost never look into our own eyes longer than it takes us to remove a wayward lash or put on mascara. For the next week, spend two full minutes every day staring into your own eyes in the mirror. Connect with the parts of yourself that go deeper than your external appearance, deeper than what you think you know about who you are. Really look. Become curious. Mark one square for each day you do the exercise:

At the end of the week, answer the following questions:

A) What did you notice from doing the mirror exercise each day?

B) Did anything surprise you about the process or about yourself?

C) What do you see when you attempt to see your soul?

D) What are your major takeaways?

Exercise 1-2: Over the course of the next week, strike up a conversation with at least three people whose external appearance makes you think *I don't have anything in common with this person*. For this exercise, it's not enough to simply say hello. Talk to each person until you discover at least one similarity that feels significant to you. If you walk away without identifying something about them that reminds you of yourself, the encounter doesn't count. Keep going until you've found a way to relate to three, seemingly "unlike you" individuals from a place of sameness, rather than of difference. Mark one square for each day you do it:

At the end of the week, answer the following questions:

A) What did you notice about meeting each person?

B) What did you have in common with each person?

C) How did these interactions challenge your initial perceptions?

D) What lessons have you learned about the way you see other people?

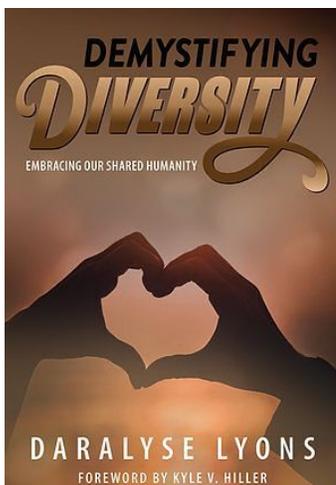
E) How can you grow as a result of these encounters?

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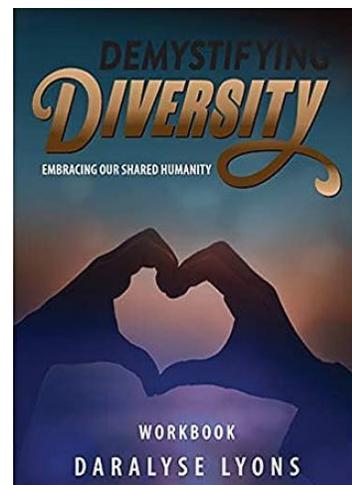
By Daralyse Lyons

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