



Video Story Transcript

A Crack in the Wall: Moving Beyond Racial Conditioning

By: Storyteller Gene Unterschuetz
www.racestoryrewrite.com

Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOPRSf6TvJ8>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Gene. I'm going to tell a story called A Crack in the Wall. It's adapted from the book "Longing: Stories of Racial Healing."

In 1993, a friend invited me to a Race Unity workshop. Uh, and I really didn't wanna go. I was really nervous about it, because I knew my life was going to change. Or I, I thought my life would change because I had never really delved into the whole issue of race. But I went anyhow. Uh, and I got snagged right from the beginning, because I was learning about institutional racism, and something I had been totally ignorant about. But I was learning how in every institution, African-Americans and other people of color, have been disadvantaged, uh, by the racism that permeates the institutions of the country. Uh, what I was learning is that, that whites - white people, white citizens wield power in virtually all of these institutions. And, so, we were given the definition. Racial prejudice plus power equals racism, and so the... it was a really compelling equation. But it led to the deduction that if you're white in America, you're racist. And I had a bit of a reaction to that.

I was thinkin', "Well, I don't really have any power. You know, I don't feel superior. I'm just a cog in the, uh, corporate machinery."

So, but as I listened to more of the lectures, aaa... I, I learned about the inequalities, yea... oh... abou... as far as, uh, disadvantages that people of color have in this country because of inter... and the institutional racism. I had been ignorant of all this stuff.

I grew up in the 50s. As a child, I was old enough to have been aware of the race riots, and the protests, and all the civil rights stuff that was goin' on at the time. But when, when I saw the, the videos that they were showing in the workshop, the imagery of the, of, uh, people getting' blasted with water hoses, uh, children and adults getting' attacked by snarling dogs. These weren't just blurry images.

I didn't have any memory of them at all, and I'm thinking, "How can, how can I have grown up in that period and not have been aware of that, because I was only 50 miles away from Chicago, where a lot of this stuff was going down?"

Well, to be aware of your indifference can lead to denial. Denial is a kind of a tricky, uh, thing to understand. Uh, denial occurs when you are aware of something that's in(un)conscionable, and you can't label it, or don't want to acknowledge it.

Uh, another example would be, if there was a hideous creature standing in front of me, and somebody said... started to describe it to me. And, uh, said how it smelled, what it looked like, and something.

And I was unable to perceive it, and I would say, "No, no! You're just imagining that. You know that's not real. You know, let... you're, you're being oversensitive. Let's just, just get on with normal, normal life here."

That would be a kind of an example of denial, when there's something that egregious, that's so obvious to other people, that you can't see. So, it's a tricky thing to, to... for us who are white to get our brains around.

Uh, and I was learning that African-Americans in this country have been pointing to racism, that hideous creature, for centuries. And that white folks had not, and still haven't, have not been able to recognize it, label it, and give it, give it, um, give it, uh, uh, you know, the reality that it's due, you know. It's sort of invisible.

So, I started to become aware of my own racial conditioning and it was, was get... was becoming a little bit painful for me, because every time that we... I left the house now, I was aware of my racial conditioning. If I was driving through a fast food place, I was conscious. If the cashier was black, I would get a little anxious, and I was, suddenly, conscious of that. If the cashier was white, I would feel at ease. In my conversations with, uh, acquaintances who were African-American, now I was really sensitive about what I was saying.

"Are my words coming out racist, exposing some deep-seated racism in me."

Uh, I'm sure people were aware of it, but I was just becoming aware of that stuff, so I was really nervous about what's coming out.

Uh, watching TV, I would see African-Americans in important peo... places in new shows and, uh, different, different sh..., uh, programs. And I would actu... I would be aware of actually wondering if they were qualified to be in those positions.

So, uh, in public places, I had to think, "Well, how do I interact with African-Americans? Should I smile at them? Should I look in their face? Should I say something? Should I just act nonchalant? But that's not really doing anything."

It was very, very painful. I felt very clumsy and awkward, as if I had just read about the history of the piano, and now I was sitting down at a baby grand and tryin' to perform a Chopin piece.

So, one day, back in 1993, I walk into a local copy shop preoccupied with my own project, but I, uh, at the service counter, I see an African-Am... young, African-American woman giving directions to, uh, the attendant that was serving her. So, I kind of went and hid behind a, uh, kiosk of, of supplies, and watched the whole action. I had never seen an African-American in that shop before, and I'd been going there quite a number of

years. In fact, I wasn't even sure if there were any African-Americans that lived in our town. So, I wanted to see how this white guy that was serving her, eh, uh, handled this unusual situation.

So, as I was watching her, I thought, "Well, look at that young, black woman. She is really competent. She's really confident in what she's doin'. She knows her stuff. Look at her take charge there, and she's nicely dressed, nice pantsuit. I bet she works for some law firm in the area here." And, uh, so, as I'm thinking this, all of a sudden, I'm thinking, "Hmm, you know what! I'm being patronizing."

And it really knocked... knocked me for a loop. I have been... had, uh, gone to the third night of the workshop that I referred to. And, so, in this workshop, we were told that we, as white folks, feel superior to black folks, and, uh, and that we are born racists. But we learn racists... racism, and, uh, and, so, we can unlearn it.

So, I'm standing there and I'm having this thought about being patronizing and thinking, "How do I unlearn this, in this situation?"

Uh, I'm tryin' to apply my, my new understanding here, so, I discovered what I call "a crack in the wall." The wall is this, uh, is this racial conditioning. And I discovered this little fissure where I could see through, and see that there was a reality beyond the wall. And I asked myself what lay beyond the wall?

Well, as we started traveling, my wife and I, we, we formed many relationships with African-Americans along the way, who were very generous, sharing stories with us. Uh, over the dinner table, they would talk about, uh, racial situations that their family members were involved in.

You know, just coming home from church, being stopped by the police, and being asked, "Why... what are you doing in this neighborhood?"

You know, fellows going out for loans and, uh, being rejected for loans and so forth. These were things I was unaware of. But the generosity of the people that, uh, we were interacting with, was, was... had the effect of breaking down all of this mythology, that we have been raised with, as, as white citizens.

Um, so, after years of participation, uh, in the workshop, uh, going through all the classes, and actually becoming a facilitator myself, I really thought I knew something. But what I discovered is that the truth about race and racial healing lay outside the classroom, beyond the state line, out of my comfort zone. If I had known how many embarrassing moments it would take for me to develop just a little bit of humility in this issue, uh, I probably wouldn't have accepted the invitation to go to that first workshop. But, you know, embarrassment is a small price to pay for the rewards of engaging in racial healing. The rewards are sharing compassion, sharing forgiveness.

Uh, sharing forgiveness and trusting. Learning how to trust people from whom we've been separated, and trust being trustworthy. That's a big one for me. Learning how to be trustworthy as a white man in this country is a biggie. So, these are the rewards. And, they convince me, that, um, when we eliminate the separation, when we go... somehow whittle away at that crack, we get on the other side of the wall. We engage. We, uh, we connect with folks, and then we learn how we can, how we can, uh, build communities that are, uh, ensuring the well-being of all of its citizens.