



Video Story Transcript

The Promise: A Lesson in White Privilege

By: Storyteller Phyllis Unterschuetz
www.RaceStoryReWrite.com

Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NA-NgMn-Zcg>

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 Phyllis Unterschuetz. And this is adapted from a story in my book, Longing: Stories of Racial Healing.

I can't think of a finer way to spend my time than sitting around a cozy kitchen table, with my girlfriends. Drinking good coffee, and sharing bits of ourselves together, in that wonderfully intimate way that women have when we're feeling safe with each other. And it was in just such a setting that I found myself late one October afternoon 1997 in New London, Connecticut. Sitting with me at the table were Catherine and Georgia. Funny, intense, passionate women, whose company I just couldn't seem to get enough of. We were fairly new friends but we were having this sisterly feeling kind of wash over us, in great waves of laughter and companionship.

We'd been talking about our children and, kind of, sharing stories of parenting. And at one point, I noticed a definite shift in the energy of the conversation. And all of a sudden, one of the women, and then the other, also, started talking about these, these anguished decisions that they had to make as the mothers of black teenage boys. As they talked their sentences sped up and pretty soon they were, kind of, talking over one another and everything was, kind of, jumbled together. It was it was as if two different voices were coming out of two different mouths but they were really the same voice. They were saying the same things.

And I heard snatches. I remember, I remember hearing them say, "You know, they were just driving along. They weren't doing anything wrong. They're stopped just because they're black. Really they weren't doing anything wrong and all of a sudden somebody's screaming at him through the window of their car. 'Show me

your license. Show me your registration.' And they're flustered. They don't know what to do. And I have to teach my son how to move his hands so slowly so that they won't think he's reaching for a weapon. And I had to teach my son exactly what to do, what to say, how to look, which words he should use, and which words he should never, ever say. Otherwise he might be shot."

And one of them said to me, "Can you imagine what that feels like. Having to teach your son those things?" You know, their faces had gotten kind of rigid and tough, as they spoke. As if any softness in such matters, even speaking them to me, could be deadly for their sons.

And me, I just sat there and tried to empathize. I tried to swallow my horror. I tried to stand in solidarity with them, you know, and say something like, "Yes, yes. I can see what you're saying. I can relate to what you're telling me." But no, instead, this horror just rose up in my throat, acidic. And I wanted to purge it by screaming out my shock and my disbelief. I wanted to say, "Here? Seriously that happens here in New England?" What did I think, did I think? That it happens only in the south? Or did I truly, on some level think, it happens only on TV and in the movies?

I wanted to say, "Those sweet boys. How could that possibly happen to them?" But, you see, if I'd said anything like that, that would have just diminished their gift to me. And so I gave them back the only thing I had of equal value, which was my honesty. And I had to say, "No...No, I can't imagine what that feels like." And what I didn't say was not only can't I imagine it but I don't have to imagine it, you see, because I'll never have to teach my son those things.

Not quite three years later, in the summer of 2000, my husband and I were having dinner in a restaurant with our son, Eric. We were in Wilmette, Illinois and Eric was about 21 years old at the time, if I remember correctly. And we were having the greatest time with our waitress. Her name was Randa. Randa was African-American. She was probably in her mid-30s, I'm guessing, and she was just one of these people makes you feel like you've been friends forever, you know, just vibrant and connective. So, towards the end of our meal, Randa came over to our table and she was carrying the pot of coffee to pour us some more. And we started talking about our kids. I think she told me a story about her young daughter. And, you know, as she was talking and we're sharing about parenting in these chaotic times, the tone of her conversation shifted.

I should have recognized that shift but I didn't. And she got real serious and quiet and all of a sudden, she said, "You know, it's not actually my daughter I'm worried about." She said, "I have a teenage son and I am so worried about him. There's so much he has to deal with out there," and her face had just become, lost its animation, and its joy, and its brightness, and just become burdened and weighed down, and fearful looking.

And I thought, oh, I wanted to say something just to, just to reassure her, just to make her feel better. And I thought, I know what she's feeling because I've raised a teenage son. I know how hard that is, watching them struggle into maturity. And I was thinkin', my 21 year old, and I thinkin' things got so much better as he got older. And so instead of taking her hand, which was what I initially wanted to do, I just gestured over to my son Eric, as evidence that I knew what I was talking about. And I looked at her earnestly and I said, "You know what? I just want to tell you that it gets better. It gets better the closer your son comes to adulthood, the better it's going to get. The older he is, the easier it will be, I promise."

And then everything changed. The light just went out of Randa's eyes. Before there'd been something flowing, now this heavy veil fell between us. The light was gone. The warmth, the trust, all of that connection gone. She was gone. And in her place was this woman, standing rigidly with a pot of coffee and these blank eyes that just looked straight ahead And she just dropped our check on the table.

She said, “Yeah, whatever. If you say so,” and then she turned and walked away. And it was like I'd been slapped in the face. What happened? I just went over every word in my mind. I couldn't imagine. Had I said something to upset her?

I started thinking through memories of conversations with other black women. Thinking maybe there I would find some clue as to what I'd said. And, you know, as soon as I did that, didn't take but a minute and I was back in Connecticut sitting at the table with Catherine and Georgia and listening to them express, what, not their excitement for their sons to get older? But, but no. Their wish that their sons could stay young forever. Knowing that the older they got, the more danger they'd be in. Hearing their anguish as they talked about sending these precious young men out each day into a society that perceives black males as criminals. And then hearing again my own admission. “No. I don't know what that feels like.”

So now, I knew what it was that had shattered the trust. I knew what I'd said because my promise, you see, was a fraud. Things were not necessarily going to get better for her son as he got older. And in fact, it was likely that they would get worse. It was likely that the closer he came to adulthood, the more frequently he would be perceived as dangerous and therefore the more danger he would be in.

And the thing is, the thing is, I knew this and I forgot. How is that possible to forget a truth like that? I ask myself, “Is this one of the elements of sneaky white privilege? Having the option to know something, to know the truth and then forget it because I think that it doesn't apply to my life?” And because of my forgetting, any hopefulness that woman had felt, had been replaced by the inescapable reality that I was just one more ignorant white woman, who actually thought I knew what she faced in her life.

So, I was in there and I'm thinking what am I going to do? What am I going to do? And as soon as I said that, Catherine in Georgia came to my rescue once again. I could see and hear them, I tell you, as clearly as if they were sitting right at the table with me, finishing up their coffee. And they just looked at me, they just looked into my face, and they said, “Get up off your butt, girl, and do something.”

And I'm talking to them, these invisible women, like, and I'm saying, “I know. I know. I will. I will. Honest, I will but I don't know what to do.”

And their voices came in a chorus, “Yes, you do. You do know.” And they were right. I did. I excuse myself from the table and I went to look for Randa. And I looked for her in the lobby, I looked for her all around the restaurant, I even looked in the smoking section in the back, which they had back in those days. I even went in the restroom and looked under the doors of the stalls trying, to find her and I couldn't. And I was ready to go into the kitchen if I had to. And fortunately, I didn't have to go that far because I looked up and Randa was coming out through the heavy kitchen doors and she was carrying a big tray covered with plates of food. And she just stopped when she saw me still and I, I stood in front of her just still myself waiting for some kind of inspiration.

And finally, I just opened my mouth and I just let the words fall out ineloquent and awkward. And I said to her, “I'm sorry. I just want to tell you that I'm sorry. I know things are not the same for your son as they are for mine. I know that things will only get harder for him as he gets older. And I knew that. I knew it already but I forgot. And I know how much I hurt you and I'm sorry.” And I couldn't see any clue on her face about how she felt and she just looked at me for a really long time. And then she turned and, you know, I thought she was just going to walk away, which wouldn't have surprised me, really, but she didn't walk away.

She set her tray down on a table and she turned back to me. And then she reached out her arms and she took me in her arms. She took me and she held me. And we hugged each other really tightly for several minutes. And then all of a sudden, in that hug, she put her head down on my shoulder and she started to weep. And I

tell you, I don't know how long we stood in that embrace but we were there. We were consoling, rocking, weeping, together. Each of us giving and taking comfort at the same time. And all the activities of the restaurant bustled unheeded around us. And when her tears were finally spent, she stepped back and looked at me. And she managed a small smile and she said, "You know it is going to be OK." She said, "With you and me, people like us, working together with the help of God. It'll be OK. We'll do it with His help."

Now, I just dumbly nodded my agreement. I couldn't speak. I don't remember who looked away first. I don't remember how we parted. I don't remember how I got out the door and into the car. I just remember, the rocking, and the weeping, and the consoling, and feeling that that web of connection being rewoven as we stood there together. And the only thought in my mind, the only clear thought I had at that moment, was there's a different promise I need to make. And this is the promise. That for the rest of my life I will work for unity. I will work for healing. I will work for justice. That is a promise I can make and that is a promise that with the help of God I can keep.