

the death of one view and the discovery of another. How long does one have to wait in the doorway where doubts and fears abide? I don't know how long that takes. For me, it was a few years before it was all sorted out. Since then, I've had no now and later.

50 - Loneliness

Q: Hi, Robert. I'm taking another trip through *The Ten Thousand Things*, and it is interesting to see some things pop out clearly that I had not noticed the first time.

As you know, I've been whining about loneliness for some time. My old friends who are wrapped up in spirituality no longer like the things I say, and I don't get much from them either. Feeling so alone no longer takes me way down into the darkness of existential death as it used to, but still, there is the sense of a hole in space, an uncomfortable openness. It is something rather unnerving, a sense of nothingness that the wind blows right through.

In Chapter 5 of *4T*, you say:

Unless you find yourself alone like that, without taking refuge in second-hand notions, no matter what their source, you will never be free, but will remain always an adherent, forever a disciple or an epigone. When I say "find yourself alone," I do not mean alone socially. I mean alone in the comprehension that your indefinable presence in this mysterious stream of energy we call "life" brings your world into being—not the world, but your world.

When I read this, it felt like being flipped into a deeper understanding; but now as I write, that understanding is lost. I think it has something to do with trying to fit in and to see the world as others seem to see it. What if this actually were *my* world as you say? Suddenly, I'd not be trying to live in someone else's world with their views and opinions, but I'd just be seeing what I see. I feel as if I might be coming through the back door on this.

Also, there was another flip into an even deeper place when you asked, "What if it's just OK to think whatever is being thought, whatever arises, without judgment or censorship?" Now that was a revolutionary idea, especially after all the meditation groups, the

books, and the rest of my cultural programming.

Say what? Did I really just hear that? Just be OK with whatever thought was passing through my mind? To be able to experience this world on that basis would be completely liberating! I feel liberated by just hearing the idea. This constant judgment of thoughts, this incessant judgment. What the hell!

Would you give me a little feedback here on the empty hole of loneliness with the wind blowing through it?

A: Yes, I will. As Jimi Hendrix, guitar in hand, raging on psychedelics, once said, “Loneliness is *such* a drag.” Jimi was right. It can feel like a drag or worse to admit that one will never be completely seen, heard, and understood by anyone, including oneself. But if we truly desire the unconditional freedom of awakeness, we must make peace with the plain fact that each of us, in the depths of our being, is very much alone, was born alone and will die alone.

No one will ever know the fullness of what we have gone through and what we find ourselves going through presently, moment by moment. I can’t even know all that about myself, much less anyone else. If good fortune has provided an understanding friend or partner, we can, of course, discuss our feelings, perhaps share anecdotes, confessions, and commiserations with one another about the human condition in general and one’s own sad state in particular—and this can be a beautiful side of friendship. But at some point, any conversation must end, and there one is, alone again.

My mother died recently at 99 years of age. We’d been great friends and I loved her. But I can’t love her anymore. Love ends, and then what we love are memories. Memories of love are not love, nor is loving a memory anything like loving a living being, which happens only in the present.

Years ago, I told you that we humans are composed physically of the same stardust, atoms, and molecules from cosmic space (which fact I’d heard from Carl Sagan)—but, psychologically and philosophically, it seems to me, we can be as far away from one another as the stars in the sky.

Yes, we all share this aliveness, but the perspective of one mind could be light years distant from that of another. This is part of what I meant when I said, “Not *the* world, but *your* world.” Each of us lives in a world of our own, because each of us sees what we see in ways that are self-centered and uniquely self-referential.

The idea of “objective consciousness”—which somehow is accorded axiomatic status: just *assumed* without evidence to exist—for me, has the ontological status of a unicorn. You can *talk* about it and *try* to imagine it, but objective consciousness does not exist, except conceptually. Please be clear on this. No matter what some “master” may claim, *objective consciousness does not exist*. You see what you see. You may disagree, and if you do, fine by me. Throughout this entire book, I am saying what I see, not trying to define “reality” for anyone else.

I used to tell the story of a bunch of teenage boys hanging out in the street and catcalling at the girls that pass: “Hey, baby. How about a taste? Come on, baby, give it up.” They’re all into this game, with clear referents in male-dominant mating rituals, until one particular girl approaches. This time, when the harassment begins, one guy dissents forcefully. “Hey! Shut the fuck up,” he tells his amigos. “That’s my *sister*!”

So that’s *his* world he’s asserting. *His* point of view. *His* consciousness. In *his* world, that young woman is not perceived as some random babe you’d like to take home and mess around with, but a member of his family who must, at all cost, be protected and respected. This example is not meant to illustrate the incest taboo, although it would serve well for that, but to demonstrate how each of us lives in a separate world of our own—primarily unconscious—making.

What you call “*the* world” is the world of *your own mind*. Still, assuming sufficient willingness and intellect, factual information—the kinds of statements that seem to correspond accurately to the material world—can be exchanged more or less easily with other minds: “It’s raining,” or “Humans have twelve ribs.”

To a far lesser extent, views, opinions, and abstract ideas can be passed from one mind to another with at least some coherence.

However, *feelings* are not nearly so amenable to being communicated. And one's personal phenomenology is *comprised* largely of feelings, often barely expressible, or entirely inexpressible. So the *fact* is that you don't know *what* I feel or what I experience. You never will to the fullest, and I cannot explain it to you.

Describing my feelings verbally won't go far, because a word can mean only what the hearer *thinks* it means based on past experience. You may *want* to know what I feel. You may even imagine that you *do* know what I feel—but you don't. You really know only your *own* feelings—to the extent they have not been pushed into the shadows or eclipsed entirely—and what you imagine *you* might feel under the circumstances. What you hear in my words, I am saying, is your mind, not mine.

This inability to be outside one's own mind is one implication of my saying that each of us is essentially alone; that each of us resides, without objective knowledge or final answers, in the vastness and freefall of this mindspace that we call the "universe." Some of us, of course, personify and commodify it as "God," as an obeisance to or as actual participants in the superstitions of our ancestors, who, in the eons before science, had no other explanation for events, whether catastrophic or beneficent, other than that a powerful deity intentionally produced and controlled those events.

In their ignorance of *natural* causes, our forebears learned to propitiate and pray; and since sacrificing infants or praying in special words for what one desired sometimes *did* seem to work, they kept it up. That is how superstition is born and thrives. When those methods failed, they could always inculcate a member of the tribe as the cause of the deity's wrath, and drive that human scapegoat out of the village or stone him to death. Maybe *that* would help. Sometimes it did.

Artistic modes—poetry, music, dance, visual images—often work better than just ordinary speech for communication of feelings and emotions; but no matter how adept an artist might be, she or he will never fully bridge the gap between one mind and another. To be honest with ourselves and one another, we must admit that. Each of us is existentially alone with our own thoughts and feelings. Expressing

some of them in words or otherwise may help to ease the sense of loneliness—but the *aleness* is still there, and always will be.

Many of us cannot tolerate the implications of that fact—that essentially one is alone in the world of one's own mind—so we resort to papering that aleness over, often by means of binding ourselves to an identity or, more likely, to an assemblage of identities composed of gender, nationality, social class, ethnicity, religion, so-called "race," political outlook, economic status... or the Michael Jackson Fan Club, for that matter. With every such identification, one asserts, declares, and affirms belonging to a *subgroup*, to a *regime* with rules, customs, and commandments of its own.

Recently, identifying "as" has become a *thing* and, for many people, the central focus of their lives, so this is a sensitive area to dissect. In looking into it, I am bound to step on toes, although that is not my intention—not at all. But questions such as yours cannot be considered properly without examining this matter free of the need to respect the prevailing cognitive biases with which many, if not most, people regard the human condition.

To be clear, I am not saying that "identifying as" exists *only* as a way of dealing with the essential human aleness that cannot be denied (you were born alone into a world you never made or chose, and will die alone). That *is* part of it—a large part perhaps—but the matter of identification is more complex than that.

To begin with, not all identities are self-selected. Certain identities are imposed upon us by the attitudes of the wider social surround. If, for example, you live in Chicago and have dark skin, you really cannot avoid at least some identification as "a person of color." Others will view you that way, and some of them will judge you on that basis, which is racism. Refusing to identify as a so-called person of color will not make that kind of racism disappear. How you are regarded by ignorant others is not your choice.

But if you live in northwest Africa—in Benin, for example, where one can spend days without seeing anyone with light colored skin—you will *not* be seen primarily as "a person of color," and do not necessarily need to "identify" that way. There, you are just a *person*, or

perhaps a Beninese, which is a *national* identity, not a *racial* one.

One way to deal with discrimination due to so-called “race,” or gender, or sexual preferences, is to make common cause with others subjected to the same bigotry, for consolation, protection, connection, and the possibility that unified efforts might move the social order in the direction of greater justice. That may be important, or even a matter of life and death, so I do not mean that one can simply stop identifying entirely. That’s not the idea.

Nevertheless—and surely this will offend some readers—identifying “as” is intrinsically a lie. It’s a lie when imposed upon us culturally (for example, I have dark skin and someone calls me “black”), and equally a lie when we *internalize* the cultural surround and impose identities upon ourselves (I call *myself* “black”). Our true identity, I say, is this aliveness and the faculty of self-awareness that comes with it. All the rest is an add-on, largely a set of misconceptions and ignorant social constructions.

I refer to “race” in scare quotes and label it as “so-called” because the idea that someone is black or white is nothing but a myth, in the sense of an unsound, fallacious idea, a *false* idea. The idea of race is so deeply embedded within our culture, and all of our minds are so deeply conditioned to believe in it, that my calling race a myth may seem crazy, but it *is* a myth in the sense that “race” exists only conceptually. Since those concepts are *racist* by their very nature, using the words “white” and “black” to refer to *people* is a form of unwitting collusion in racism driven by *social compliance*: others say black and white and so you do it too.

Yes, it may seem convenient to use the words “white” and “black” to refer to people when you only mean to indicate one person or another—as in, for example, “That ‘white’ guy over there.” I have said such words myself. But I have come to feel that it is worth the effort to avoid that mode completely and to find other ways to point someone out, just as one must do in a room full of people who all have a similar skin tone: “That tall guy over there. The one with the green shirt.”

Race is a *concept* defined by society, *not* by genes. I am not

denying that we human animals differ genetically due to ancestry, but *race is a myth* because the imputation of racial identity to one person or another based on ancestry is a fabrication, a canard and nothing more, regardless of how many people believe in it.

Believe what you will. Here is the science:

There is no genetic sequence unique to blacks or whites or Asians. In fact, these categories don't reflect biological groupings at all. There is more genetic variation in the diverse populations from the continent of Africa—who some would lump into a “black” category—than exists in all populations from outside of Africa, the entire rest of the world combined.

Dark or light skin tells us only about a particular human's amount of ancestry relative to the equator, not anything about the specific population or part of the planet he or she might be descended from. There is not a single biological element unique to any of the groups we call white, black, Asian, Latino, etcetera... This is not to say that humans don't vary biologically, we do, a lot. But rather that those variations are not racially distributed.

—Agustín Fuentes Ph.D.

This is not just an opinion of mine or of Dr. Fuentes. The following are the words of a cutting-edge geneticist:

My laboratory discovered in 2016, based on our sequencing of ancient human genomes, that “whites” are not derived from a population that existed from time immemorial, as some people believe. Instead, “whites” represent a mixture of four ancient populations that lived 10,000 years ago and were each as different from one another as Europeans and East Asians are today.

—Dr. David Reich, Ph.D.

And another:

There is no definition of race that corresponds with variation in

DNA. Race is not defined by DNA. We've known this for quite some time now, and we largely abandoned the term "race" in biology decades ago for this reason . . . "Race" most certainly exists as a social construct. But folk and colloquial racial definitions correspond poorly to human variation in DNA.

—Dr. Adam Rutherford

And another:

The concept of race has no genetic or scientific basis.

—Craig Venter, who led the first draft sequence of the human genome.

And finally:

Problems arise when meaning is made from superficial genetic differences. It's a fairly short leap to the incorrect conclusion that peoples, in addition to their similar surface-level physical attributes, might have different psychological, physical, or intellectual attributes. It's such a pervasive, simple idea that it can lead us to believe that it's actually true, normal, or natural. It's a powerful idea that, in many ways, we have structured our society around. This is so true that after 60 years of scholarship which says over, and over, and over, that it is not true, this simple idea may still be shocking.

—Paul D. Sturtevant, *Is "Race" Real?*

In that view—which is the consensus view of genetics—so-called “race” has no biological meaning at all. No one is “black.” No one. To regard someone *as* black is a lie that tells us nothing factual about that person. This does not mean that *racism* is not real. On the social level, of course *racism* is real, as real as a heart attack. But racism is based on a *false premise*: so-called “race,” which is a word like “mermaid,” without any factual correspondence to the actual physical world.

The point of this chapter is not to deny that most people use terms like “white man,” or “person of color,” *as if* they referred to

something real, but to indicate that in my view, to the extent that you *believe* such terms refer to something real, you, like most people, have been hypnotized by the erroneous, ignorant conceptions of the generalized cultural surround. And until you snap out of *that* hypnotic trance, you will never be what I call “awake.”

In 20th-century USA, some states enacted into law the so-called “one drop rule,” which asserted that any person with even one ancestor of sub-Saharan African ancestry—no matter how distant (“one drop of black blood”)—was considered black, or “negro,” as the word was back then in my youth. And the racism embedded in this “one drop” idea becomes even more obvious by the rule of *hypodescent*, which meant that children of a “mixed union” between different racial groups—the children of *miscegenation*, as it was called—would belong automatically to the group with the *lower* status, regardless of the proportion of ancestry in different groups.

No one is a “negro” any longer, but still, in the United States, a person is “black” if he or she has any sub-Saharan African ancestry at all—as if “blackness” were a kind of stigma, the slightest trace of which marked someone indelibly. In Brazil, this matter is seen and adjudicated along lines that are the polar opposite of the “one drop rule”. There, a person is *not* “black” if he is known to have any European ancestry at all.

Why is Barack Obama “black?” Why is Mariah Carey “black?” Why is Tiger Woods “black?” Why is Halle Berry “black?”

They are *not* “black,” I say, and neither is anyone else, even if they, having *internalized* the “one drop rule,” now identify “as” black. If you have dark skin, others, *in their ignorance*, might refer to you as “black,” but that doesn’t mean *you* must call *yourself* “black.”

Racism is toxic. It is a poison that has no legitimate use. Race is a lie. Let us not, I am saying, allow the racists to define reality for us.

This is not to say that one particular human population, somewhat isolated by geography and breeding mostly within its own members, does not evolve in ways different from another such isolated genetic concentration. Clearly, that has occurred and continues to occur. Height, for example, is a heritable trait so that, on average,

certain population groups are taller and others shorter. Such variation can apply to any heritable trait. But that is the *average* we are talking about—not *the individual*.

An individual human is just that: a singular case with all kinds of traits that may diverge widely from the average. In fact, usually there is more variance *within* population groups than *between* them. To wit, the average Chinese is shorter than the average Netherlander; adult male height in China is around 1.72 meters (5 feet 8 inches), quite a bit shorter than the 1.81 meters (just under 6 feet) of the average man in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the Chinese basketball player Yao Ming, at 2.3 meters (7 feet 5 inches) in height, is taller than *any* man in Holland, or in most other places for that matter. Averages say nothing about the individual.

Social scientists like to use so-called “race” and ethnicity to make generalized statements about populations—for example, “White people in the US commit suicide at nearly three times the rate of ethnic minorities.” In my view, that procedure is bogus. It opens the door to errors of all kinds, including the encouraging and supporting of racism; and the statement itself is linguistically unsound. An *ethnic minority* is a population made up of people who share a common *cultural* background—not necessarily a common skin color.

I understand the desire to split people up that way, particularly for a certain kind of scientist for whom taxonomy is a major approach, but it won’t wash. Drawing such boundary lines may be justified by convenience, but from my perspective, such splitting is entirely spurious. There is, I say, no valid racial taxonomy.

As a photographer who works almost exclusively in monochrome, I know every shade from darkest black to whitest white and how to put them on a page. The human face is one of my favorite subjects, so I see skin color just fine. Better than most, I’d reckon. Plain as day. But when I regard a face, I don’t see “race”—and that’s part of what I mean by “awake.”

It doesn’t take a genius to see people as I do. It’s a plain fact—a direct report of my experience. When I look at your face, I don’t see a “black face” or a “white face”—I see a *human* face: my own

phenomenology of a certain human face. Every face is different. And when I look into your eyes, I don’t see “white male pain,” or “black lesbian pain,” I see only human pain. The phenomenology of human pain.

Now, in my experience, this statement is just where an identity politics advocate might misconstrue my point of view as coming from either ignorance or white privilege:

“Easy for *you* to say this, Robert. You are a ‘white man’ with an Ivy League education and a Ph.D. You are in like Flynn. You don’t *need* to identify. You can have the luxury of ignoring ‘race.’ Your pain is *not* my pain.”

I understand that point of view. And I accept my good luck in being well-educated and at peace with my gender. But I will *not* accept the “white” part. I refuse to collude in that. I am *not* “white,” and I will not allow the history of racism and the unwitting internalization and embrace of racism to label me with that falsehood.

If you mean that getting stopped for speeding is a lot less scary for me than it is for a man with dark skin, yes—and just like all of us, I need all the luck I can get, so if the cops don’t see me as a suspect, I’ll take it. As for the rest, yes, “race” permeates the entire world-culture, and doors are open and closed based on that falsehood. Does that mean that my light skin opened doors that would have been closed to someone like me but with darker skin? Very likely, but that is not my doing.

This is a key point. To go any further into this requires admitting to oneself that justice is a Platonic ideal, not a condition that pertains to human actuality, where everything that can be turned to advantage *is* turned to advantage. Whatever can be corrupted already is corrupted. Every niche where there is money or privilege to be gotten, legally or illegally, morally or immorally, is filled.

You did not make this world. Certainly, you had no influence on this life before you were born. No matter what color your skin is, you are not responsible for any of that. This seems logically obvious but does not go down well with people who focus primarily on injustice.

It is unjust, this racism, but so is everything else. Yes, being born with dark skin may be disadvantageous in a milieu of racism, and that is totally unfair. But being born with a dull mind or a face people find unattractive is a disadvantage too. We don't get to choose any of this.

Guilt is a terrible burden. I have some Austrian friends much younger than me who, while knowing logically that they were never Nazis and had no influence on anything that occurred years before they were born, still feel somehow implicated. As I say, this is a key point.

If that is clear, the subject under discussion here is not racism, although that subject needs plenty of attention. The subject before us concerns identifying "as." In pointing out the fallacy of identifying "as," so-called "race" comes into it, because "race" is off-the-charts popular as an anchor for identification. I understand that, but here I am clarifying what I mean by "awake," which requires going much deeper into what "myself" is or isn't than just the luck-of-the-draw tribulations of personal appearance and personal history. I am not writing all that off, but pointing to perspectives that can *include* all that, without *fixating* on any of it.

So, having been born with the "right" skin tone, in a sense I *would* have the luxury of ignoring race if I really *could* ignore it—but I can't. Of all the stupid, self-inflicted wounds of humankind—and they are many—racism is among the worst.

My closest friend at Columbia had dark skin. He'd been born a mile from the campus, right in the middle of Harlem, where in those days you'd see nary a light-skinned face. I never thought of my friend as "black," nor did he, I imagine, think of me as "white," unless that dubious duality was imposed upon us from the outside such that it needed to be taken into account.

This was neither naivete nor colorblindness. It's not that so-called "race" never came up—it came up frequently. How could it not in a world so permeated by racism, as we traveled together in strange and dangerous locales, sometimes finding ourselves in places where most people had light skin, and sometimes where most had dark skin? It's just that I thought of Joe as this really bright, beautiful friend of mine who could destroy me on a chessboard—not "black." Later in life, I

played bass in a blues band in which I was the only light-skinned member of the combo.

You may not like my ideas on the subject of "race," but they cannot be dismissed as coming from ignorance or "whiteness." I have pretty much seen it all.

Of *course* I comprehend why the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of slaves would want to assert an historical identity. So much identity was stolen from them along with all the rest. It's a tragic history, and it's not healed yet—far from it.

This is a hard topic to discuss with candor. We are living in a world-wide bigoted culture. *White privilege* certainly exists as a major factor in that bigotry. But in stating the *facts* about so-called "race," I am not ignoring that. Rather, I am pointing out how, for those of us who are *not* racists, splitting the world's people falsely gets in the way of an awakened view of what "myself" really is. My topic here is not identity politics, but freefall with no handholds.

I am being as precise and careful as I can, because, once having identified "as," having that identification debunked might feel like having the rug pulled out from under you, and that is not my intention. Nor is my perspective in any way a repudiation of the racism afflicting us all. To be clear, racism is a chief feature of human life all over this planet, and that cannot be denied.

The loss of any identity, even a false one, can feel like a kind of death—ego-death. And if you are racially identified, here I am apparently criticizing that. But if you have read this far, and are still reading, perhaps there is something about my perspective on "race" that seems sane and worth considering. You are not likely to hear this point of view very often, so get it while it's hot.

This world can be hard and cruel, and I understand why people who feel marginalized would resort to splitting. If, for example, the "straight people" want to demean you because your way of being sexual or your sense of gender does not fit their narrow biases, well then—you can find a different type of gender that matches you better. That's OK. I'm all for expanding upon established ideas of male and female, and seeing gender more accurately as a spectrum than an

either/or. If, for example, you tell me that your gender is “non-binary,” I get that. Makes perfect sense actually.

But when the notion of gender is split into smaller and smaller subgroups that really have more to do with the need to identify “as” something special than with anything about sexual expression, the train has jumped the track. Last I heard, we are up to 63 genders—uh oh, someone just told me 80 is the latest number—that can be displayed on social media, which is, in my view, bonkers.

Aethergender—a gender that feels very wide, commanding, breathtaking, and powerful.

Xumgender—a gender that is never satisfied with itself due to constant self-doubt or identity issues, causing one to compulsively search and seek out the perfect gender or the “one truth.”

Oh, please! What arrant horseshit. Gender, in my view, is not about whether you feel breathtaking and powerful or you don’t. Gender is related to sexuality and its expression—not whether you feel breathtaking or have doubts.

To me, the word “gender” refers to one’s own understanding about whether one is a man or a woman, something in between, or none of that. So in this view, your *sex* refers to actual physical organs at birth, and to which category biology caused you to be “assigned”—and *gender* is how you feel and think that applies to you. Gender is about how you think and feel about your sexuality, not about trying to fit into one of dozens of cubbyholes.

But it’s not quite that straightforward. There are differences in brain structure between men and women that cannot be ignored, some of them major. Even fifteen years ago that idea was distinctly out of favor, but technological advances have revealed and measured those differences with clarity. I don’t want to get too far into the weeds here, but the entire topic of sex and gender is already fraught and likely to become even more conflict-laden as the politics of gender identification meets neuropsychology.

So it falls to us—the *dissidents*, the *awake* ones, the lobsters who manage to climb out of the pot, out of the “identify as” chowder—to assert that we see individuals *as* individuals and not identified “as” anything. That is why you must not expect me to focus upon your chosen *identity* as a chief feature of your being. You may need, for one reason or another, to identify “as,” and I will respect that—but I don’t see people that way, and am I *glad* I don’t.

Getting back to ethnicity for a moment: ethnicity means shared *culture*, not shared *appearance*. Ethnicity has nothing to do with so-called “race,” although those who like to think in racial terms believe it does. “Ethnic” is unequivocally *not* an apt or proper synonym for “non-white,” although some people, including even very bright, well-educated people, use it that way.

So, now that we have been around that block, who are these suicidal “white people” in the US that the social scientists are blathering about? And anyway, apart from statistics, your particular shade of skin color says nothing at all about whether *you* will commit suicide, regardless of how you “identify.” There are plenty of so-called “black people” taking their own lives every day, I am sure. Humans are not averages, our deepest and most authentic being *has* no color, and most of us feel that.

This is a fraught topic, thrown completely off kilter by identity politics, which is founded on the expectation and requirement that one’s views will unvaryingly support the agenda of “*our side*,” including a kind of self-hypnotic ritual consisting of intentionally fanning the flames of one’s own cognitive biases, while throwing shade on any idea to the contrary, regardless of how well-substantiated. As Susan Dunn wrote of the French Revolution: “Any distinction between their own political adversaries and the people’s ‘enemies’ was obliterated.” This is a prescription for ignorance.

In considering the matter of so-called “race,” the easiest shade to throw is not that one view or another is erroneous or misconceived, but that—except for the ones on “our side”—anyone else speaking about “race” or gender *at all* is out of bounds right from the start. Behind this perverse desire to deem certain topics completely out

of bounds (except for certain people who for one reason or another have the right to speak of them) resides the assumption, never openly stated, that a dumbed-down world, in which difficult information is elided so that no one *ever* feels unsafe or offended, surpasses *ethically* a world of open-eyed, open-minded intelligence that relies not upon ideas that make us feel *safe*, but upon the best facts available, regardless of *how* they make us feel.

Unfortunately, to the extent that ideas may be considered not just offensive but *too* offensive to be spoken, our ability to express ideas—or even just to cite plain facts—is compromised. Since ordinary sanity requires openness to honesty—anything less is a dumbing down—a dilemma ensues. Often the brightest among us keep their views to themselves, falling silent rather than risk arousing the self-righteous wrath and the witless verbal attacks or worse of the lesser lights who prefer emotional comfort to truth.

Nowadays, university professors run scared. If they say the “wrong” thing, even if factually correct, their words are likely to be in play on social media in a trice. Then there will be the call to the dean’s office, etcetera.

Working to straighten out our ways of discussing gender and skin color seems a worthy project. Eliminating thoughtful views on those matters because the speaker of those views is somehow disqualified due to skin color, gender, or any other factor, is not the way, I say.

I have no intention of offending anyone, but in this space, I must say what I see, and you can always stop reading whenever you like. I will speak as plainly and clearly as I can, so that any objections at least stand a *chance* of being objections to what I actually say.

If you identify “as” Jewish, there is no biological or racial truth in that at all. None. No one is a Jew biologically or racially. Race does *not* exist. Observing the physical characteristics of another human standing silently before you offers no inside information about that human. Absolutely none. To imagine that skin color can offer such information is pure delusion. Regardless of the color of your skin or that of the person you are observing, if you imagine knowing something about that person based on physical appearance, that is a *racist*

delusion. And that is the point.

If you have dark skin and, on seeing a light-skinned human, you think you are looking at a “white man,” whereas you are “black,” that is the form of impaired comprehension that I call “splitting.” That split was *imposed* upon you, and now you accept it, embrace it, defend it, and even pass it on to your children. Unless you are able to see that culturally-imposed—and now self-imposed—limitation as the lie it is, you will never be what I call “awake.”

If you live in the USA, for example, and your skin is dark, you may feel that, since “blacks” are a minority that has been oppressed historically, you are *obliged* to accept that identity. If you didn’t, you would be “acting white.” You may feel that you have not *chosen* to identify “as” black, but have had that identity forced upon you. I can’t disagree with that. I know the history first hand. I traveled in the American South when Jim Crow was the law and “colored” waiting rooms and “whites only” water fountains were the rule.

So when middle-school teacher Julia Blount posted the following, I knew what she meant:

Dear White America,

It is somewhat strange to address this to you, given that I strongly identify with many aspects of your culture and am half-white myself. Yet, today is another day you have forced me to decide what race I am—and, as always when you force me—I fall decidedly into “Person of Color.”

Every comment or post I have read today voicing some version of disdain for the people of Baltimore—“I can’t understand” or “They’re destroying their own community” or “Destruction of Property!” or “Thugs”—tells me that many of you are not listening.

Yes, Julia, given the last 400 years of human history, how can you *not* identify as black in a culture of racism in which a rich, white-skinned *guilty* man stands a better chance in court than a poor, dark-skinned *innocent* one, and policing includes such imaginary “crimes” as driving in the wrong neighborhood while black? I get that. And I

understand also why, faced with an ignoramus who denies that *racism* exists at all, you might need to *educate* and *orient* that racism-denier by saying something like, “If you were *black* like me, you wouldn’t be talking that way.”

But history, politics, and racism have nothing to do with *awake*. And *awake* has nothing to do with how others see you, but rather is about how and what *you* see. That is what is being discussed here—not social mores, which are what they are and change only slowly.

So even if you do find it necessary to say something like “black like me,” I advise saying it with fingers crossed behind your back, because, like Julia Blount, you *really* know that *you* are *not* “black,” unless some racist makes you be.

Awakeness sees with open eyes the history of racism and its crimes against humanity and sees the racism that infuses everything even today, but will not allow racism to be reenacted within one’s *own* mind. In your deepest heart of hearts, you probably know you are not “black,” and probably know that the light-skinned cat over there isn’t “white” either; or, vice versa, you probably know, like me, that you are not “white,” and that dark-skinned dude isn’t “black” either.

If a clear-eyed outlook is desired, it’s best not to *reenact* that split. Social pressures encourage reenacting it. If one can identify as human, and nothing lesser, the split will have healed within one’s own mind. That will not, it is true, cure racism. Nothing you arrive at can do that. But at least, within your own mind, the trance of false identification will have run its course.

There may be comfort to be found in identifying “as” one thing or another. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, the tribe is most conducive to genetic survival, not going it alone. So it is somewhat instinctive to want to fit in, to get with the program, to go along to get along. We all like to feel connected and accepted—it’s just natural. But tribal days are over and cannot return.

In this interconnected world, tribal identifications are fictions imposed culturally upon the freshness, curiosity, and freedom of our minds, which then have to sort through those lies and discard them. In an *awakened* understanding, no identity applies but our identity as

primate humans with the concomitant human faculty of self-awareness. That faculty is unrelated entirely to skin color or gender.

To be clear, I am not denying the phenomena of white privilege, economic privilege, male privilege, or gender discrimination. All four exist on this planet, and no one, I say, should pretend they don’t. I am saying that one can see the injustice of those phenomena clearly, and work towards ending them, without having to identify “as” anything but human.

To stop identifying “as” is what I mean by not taking refuge in second-hand notions. I don’t mean just the false notions of race and gender identification, but also religious and philosophical beliefs of every stripe—which are, by definition, second-hand. This is not to say that all beliefs are as unfounded or invalid as so-called “race.” An idea may be more or less valid in proportion to how it agrees with or can predict events and conditions in the real world, including the psychological world. But regardless of validity, *beliefs* are second-hand *by definition*. If you know something *first-hand* because you experience it, you don’t *need* to believe in it.

You may believe that existentialism is more valid than Christianity or vice versa, but I advise avoiding identification with either one. I strongly advise against saying, even to oneself, “I am a Christian,” or “I am an existentialist”—or a nondualist, or a feminist, or a socialist, or a “white cisgendered male”... or you fill in the blank.

If identification “as” comes to an end, that leaves *you*, as you are in this moment, *depending on nothing*: not religion, not gender, not economic class, not nationality—none of it. No “thing.” Yes, this abstinence from all identification may feel lonely, but it has the virtue of being honest, true, and *awake*.

Nevertheless, it takes plenty of gumption to stop identifying, because identification is the way most humans think and speak at all times. The news reports will continue saying that “blacks believe so and so,” as if there really were such a group as “blacks.” So great is the pressure to conform to racial (racist) terminology as “whites” and “blacks,” that relatively few people will understand “race” as a figment of human misunderstanding, driven by the need to categorize

what cannot be categorized: this aliveness.

So in most situations, unless I happen to be with eyes-wide-open people, or perhaps a group of geneticists (ha, ha), I will find myself *alone* in this view—completely alone. That might feel lonely, but what is the alternative—drink the Kool-Aid?

An old Sufi tale goes this way:

One day, the prophet Khidr met Moses, who told him that, before long, all the water in the world would dry up and be replaced with new water, but that the new water would make people insane. So Khidr began to preach:

“To save yourselves, you must stockpile all the water presently here on Earth. Save the old water, and you will be saved from madness.”

But among the multitude who heard Khidr preach, only one very bright man heeded his advice. That man collected all the water he could. He went to rivers, streams, ponds, and pools, and drew water from every well in the area. He filled any container he could find and hid the old water in a secret cave.

Then one day, just as Khidr had foretold, the rivers stopped flowing, and the rivers, wells, ponds, and pools dried up. No matter where people looked, there was scant water to be found.

The one man who had heeded Khidr, taking care to make sure no one followed him, went to his cave and hid there, drinking the water he had accumulated.

Soon, it began to rain, and rivers were once again flowing. The people, who had been close to dying from thirst, were delighted and appreciated water as they never had before.

The man in the cave, confident that everything was fine again, left the cave and returned to his village. When he saw people drinking, he approached and called out, “Hello”—but no one responded.

Soon the man discovered that his neighbors had gone mad. They spoke an entirely different language from the one they had once spoken, and had no memory of the time before the drought. The man tried in every way he could to tell them, but when he

spoke, no one could understand him. To them, it appeared that he had gone mad.

He tried to reason with them: “That riverbed was only rocks and dust. The well was dry. The lake was dust.”

The people asked themselves, “What is he saying?” He could not understand their language, but he did understand the expressions on their faces.

They stared at him as if he were the one who had gone mad. They shook their fists and shouted. Soon, he became afraid. They would never remember the world as it had once been. They would never understand what he was trying to say. Khidr had been right. So he returned to the safety of his cave and back to his secret water. He refused to drink the new water that drove everyone mad. No. He would remain in the safety of his world, with his own water.

But as time went on, he felt lonelier and lonelier. No family. No friends. No one to talk to. One day, his loneliness became too much to bear. He returned to the village and took a big drink from the community well.

Instantly, he could understand the language that the others were speaking and soon forgot all about his cave and the old water. His old friends were happy for him. “You were out of your mind,” they said. “But now you are OK again.” And because he no longer remembered, he did not dispute it.

When you confess to “a sense of nothingness that the wind blows through,” and speak of “the empty hole of loneliness,” I see the promptings of an awakening mind that has had just about enough of trying to escape loneliness by seeking to define this indefinable presence “as” anything but what it is—a complete and total mystery. As for the friends who no longer like what you have to say, those lost friendships are just collateral damage to this awakening. Let them go.

Jump right into that hole of aloneness, I say, and see what it’s like to be on your own without trying to define yourself as anything but this aliveness, this flow.