

I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A CONVERSATION ABOUT RACE

A guide for engagement

Transforming how we think and talk about race

v. 1.0



Racism and white supremacy are embedded in institutional structures of society, not seeing it is no great service, because it will reproduce itself unless it's disrupted. We can really disrupt race fundamentally, where you can no longer predict access to power and wealth and privilege and meaning, based on race...and that future is possible, but only if we're willing to first notice it."

–john a. powell

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May, 2016

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A guide for engagement:

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About this book

A Guidebook	10
Direct Experience	14

Process

Prepare	16
Create Space	24
Engage	30
Reflect	44

Closing thoughts	49
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ABOUT THIS BOOK



This is a guidebook. It was made for people...

who are concerned that racism is still a serious issue in the United States and have struggled with how to they can address it. How can we shift the forces of racism, bias, and privilege that are able to go so unnoticed in our daily lives?

And we know there are many other people...

who are unaware about these issues. These are people (good people!) with whom we may interact or see regularly, but don't necessarily have the opportunity to engage with in a meaningful way.



ABOUT THIS BOOK

We often lack the skills and/or opportunity to engage with people around the issues we think are important to discuss, especially sensitive topics.

How can we engage in discussions about race that are **meaningful**, **productive** and **accessible**?

RACE

BIAS

PRIVILEGE

These are big topics we may rarely discuss, or we approach timidly in public or social spaces and yet are ever-present in our daily lives and interactions.

When we do discuss these issues, the conversations may often be unsatisfying and confusing, leaving us feeling guilt, blame, or even anger. These strong emotional reactions are not surprising given the sensitive nature of the topics and/or the relative irregularity that we discuss them.

Why are you encouraging us to engage about race?

I am white. I researched this work and wrote this guide as a white person trying to understand racial disparities

Despite racism being a major force shaping our present cultural environment, it can often be difficult to see this racism, particularly in our everyday experience.

Dominant, white culture does not necessarily have to confront race on a regular basis, the way people of color do every day. As the overwhelming dominant culture, we do not necessarily suffer the damaging consequences of racism. Though it is all around us, our experience does not force us to notice it in the same way as people of color.

Like the air we breathe, we constantly—and without thought—consume biases from our cultural environment. These biases embed into our subconscious and influence our decision-making.* This ability, for people to be so unaware and unconscious of how we are affected by pervasive racism, is what this work seeks to address.

It does this through promoting a process to create authentic and meaningful engagements. By advocating engagement on these issues, we create opportunities for people to begin to see them more clearly, and through awareness, seed the willingness for change.

**See the resources for more information..*

*If we cannot see the issue, we cannot
understand it, and we cannot even
begin to address it.*

There are many people working today to build racial equity—through research, policy, trainings, advocacy, and activism. I am a designer. The process presented in this guide was developed through a participatory design approach. This means I went out and met with people to try and create meaningful, productive, authentic engagements about race. I went into informal, daily life places (bars), throughout Manhattan and Brooklyn, and invited strangers to have a conversation with me about race.

At the heart of this work is the belief that the most significant contribution we can make in the fight for social justice and racial equity is to examine our own beliefs and patterns and work to change ourselves.

Before I started creating these engagements, I interviewed, held workshops, and attended trainings with experts from varied fields to learn about issues of race, how to understand belonging and inclusion, facilitate difficult conversations, and create space for self-awareness.

I was particularly interested in how to have these interactions with people who are not frequently thinking about or engaging with these topics and how to make them productive. For me, a productive interaction means both people are learning and able to reflect on their own experiences with these issues.

As I had these conversations, I learned from each engagement and it informed my future approaches. I distilled what I learned into this booklet.

Direct Experience

This guidebook will walk you through the process outlined on the opposite page. This process proposes a way to understand race, bias, and privilege and raise awareness about these issues through direct experience. It suggests an approach to build racial equity through in-person engagement and personal reflection rather than academic understanding or political action. This process helps embolden us to engage more frequently and with this, we hope to:

- **Create more awareness** of the influences of bias and privilege in everyday life
- **Understand our personal relationships** with the issues of race, bias, and privilege
- **Guide us to create spaces** where people are engaged and feel safe to say what they think and ask questions
- **Provide suggestions** for how to transform discomfort and points of disagreement into new understandings and connections
- Allow our interactions to **inform how we are in the world**

A Process

If this were a cookbook, the information presented here would be encouragement to start baking and instructions on how to approach it. It would not be a recipe to follow. Following these instructions does not guarantee a specific outcome. In fact, I encourage you not to be attached to predetermined outcomes with these engagements.

Rather, this process is asking us to engage *more*, think about *how we engage*, and incorporate our own learnings and experiences to make the process our own. It does not ask us to change people or reach a certain end point.



PREPARE



CREATE SPACE



ENGAGE



REFLECT

There is so much information out there about race, racism, privilege, and bias. And I think a lot of it is really good. But it can be overwhelming. There is no way we can, or need to, read, watch, listen to, or know everything. The key to being a conversation builder is becoming personally aware of these issues in your life.



PREPARE

Two-parts: external and internal

External: Resources

Ground knowledge in basic writings and media

To help you begin, I have put together a resource list specifically oriented towards the goal of being able to talk to other people about our experiences with these topics.

The resources suggested here were chosen based on three criteria:

- 1 Accessible and understandable
(regardless of your background)
- 2 Diverse approaches—readings, audio, visuals, and exercises
- 3 Emphasis on facilitating personal awareness of race, bias, and privilege

The resources listed here can be found with a simple Google search or by going to the website and clicking on Resources.

Although all the resources are chosen to be accessible for all levels of audiences, next to each entry is a scale of accessibility, as there is variation.

External: Resources

Ground knowledge in basic writings and media

Online Activities and Websites

**Recommended*

- **A Trip to the Grocery Store*, World Trust:
- Film clip and reflection questions that discuss race and white privilege
- *Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible + 5 Steps to Productive Conversation about White Privilege*, World Trust:
- Blog entry with film clip and tips on how to talk about white privilege
- RacialEquityTools.org:
- Designed for people working in the field of racial equity, the site includes tools, research, glossary terms, curricula and ideas
- **LookDifferent.org*, MTV:
- Interactive and informative website using visuals, games, and pop culture to explain and explore different topics related to biases

Videos and Podcasts

- **Fear of a Brown Planet/Reverse Racism*, Jamer Rahman
- Stand up comedy video clip about reverse racism
- *Decoded*, MTVNews
- Weekly series of vlogs that address and explain modern-day issues of race
- *About Race*, Baratunde Thurston, Raquel Cepeda, Tanner Colby
- Podcast series (19 episodes) exploring national conversations and current events about race
- **Facing Our Racial Past*, Khalil Muhammad
- Interview describing how present policies and structures in America perpetuate old systems of racism and oppression

○ *Written for all audiences, understandable,*
○ *can be easily consumed in a single sitting*

● *Written for a specific audience, cannot*
● *be consumed in one sitting or one day*

External: Resources

Ground knowledge in basic writings and media

Online Articles

*Recommended

- **The Scientific Way to Train White People to Stop Being Racist*, Quartz
- Helpful explanation and tips on the difficulties of seeing and discussing racism
- **When Whites Just Don't Get It*, New York Times: 2014–2016
- Series of articles explaining ways we do not see racism
- *Defining Implicit Bias*, Kirwan Institute: Annual
- Straightforward explanation of bias and links to Kirwan's extremely informative, but longer, annual report on implicit bias
- *Race: The Power of Illusion*, PBS:
- Interview with John A. Powell
- *Structural Racism and Community Building*, The Aspen Institute:
- In-depth exploration of structural racism and communities

Books

- **Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates:
- Engaging memoir about the experience of blackness in America
- Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*,
- Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony Greenwald:
- Accessible, conversational style book explaining the latest research on our hidden biases in a way that is both informative and self-revealing.
- Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of*
- *Racial Inequality in America*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva
- This book is the most complex, academic-focused resource listed here. It is a seminal work on the topic. While scholarly, it is still accessible to non-academic audiences.

○ Written for all audiences, understandable,
○ can be easily consumed in a single sitting

● Written for a specific audience, cannot
● be consumed in one sitting or one day

External: Resources

Ground knowledge in basic writings and media

Your Own Resources

Use the space below to track resources you find that resonate for you. New material on this topic comes out every day, and we are sure to come across other, useful resources.

Internal: Reflect *Make it personal*

A key indicator you are ready for the work suggested in this guide is when you begin to see forces of structural racism in your own environment. Use the resource material to start to identify and reflect on the influences of bias and privilege in your life. The accompanying journal is also a tool to help you identify these influences.

You do not have to be an expert. One of the obstacles that holds us back from engaging is the fear we don't know enough. We are afraid we will say something that makes us look bad or cause someone to be angry or hurt. This fear has completely stagnated our ability to see and understand race, privilege and bias in our lives. We must overcome this fear of saying the "wrong" thing to accomplish the goal of creating authentic connections and understanding.

That being said, don't jump into the deep end. Use the suggested resources to enter the pool and swim on over.

Internal: Reflect and Write *Make it personal*

Once you begin to notice systems of power and privilege in your environment, they will continue to reveal themselves.

If after exploring the suggested resources and reflecting in the activity journal that accompanies this guidebook, you cannot see or do not believe in the forces of structural racism, implicit bias or white privilege, do not proceed.

Similarly, if you feel you play no role in this system whatsoever, regardless of your race, also do not proceed.

Regardless if you are preparing for these interactions in advance, as I did, or you are engaging at a moment's notice, it's important to make a conscious effort to create space for the conversation. Creating space is what turns an ordinary, routine discussion, into a meaningful and possibly transformational interaction.



CREATE SPACE

Four suggested preparations:

- 1 Designate physical space
- 2 Have a secondary activity
- 3 Set a time period
- 4 Acknowledge the topic

1. Designate Physical Space

Grant permission to act/speak differently

Designating the space is all about granting you and the other conversation participant(s) permission to be able to speak and act differently than what might be considered “normal” or “appropriate.” Using a physical location provides an environmental signal to people to be more open and encourages us to physically commit to having the conversation.

In my research, I used simple signage, tape, and props to communicate what I was doing. I designated two stools at the bar as the “space” for these conversations.

If someone approached me while standing outside, at the pool table, or some other location inside the bar, I asked them to come sit with me at the assigned seats. This highlighted that we were stepping into an unique interaction and served as an active visual of committing to the conversation.

If you wish to talk to someone about this topic you might choose a specific place to sit and use something simple in the environment to visually designate the area. Even if the space is a physical location you are both familiar with, it can be made visually evident that for this conversation, it is designated for something outside of the ordinary.

Don't make it a spectacle. When I used excessively bright colors or props such as balloons, the interaction became more of an exhibition, than an opportunity for engagement.

2. Have a Secondary Activity

Give your attention some space to relax

When discussing a sensitive or difficult topic, it is helpful to have a secondary, material activity. Providing a secondary activity allows participants to be more at ease. It offers a way to “take a break” from eye contact or answering a question immediately and can serve as a diversion during particularly intense moments.

The activity should still allow you to give the content of the conversation your main attention, such as having a drink or a cup of coffee. Activities such as watching a movie or driving a car require too much of your attention to be focused elsewhere.

3. Set a Time Period

Use constraints to maximize participation

Constraints open people up. Knowing there is a specific amount of time you are going to discuss a heavy topic like this helps. People are more comfortable to open up when they know they will be able to walk away or change the subject after a set of time.

It also allows you to put a lot of energy in to the time you have allotted and know you will not have to maintain it. One of the most important things I learned is that my ability to remain present in a deep, substantial conversation and to actively listen seriously deteriorates after about an hour. My attention waned and my emotional reactions were unpredictable.

The secondary activity can be a tool to provide a flexible, yet fixed time frame for engagement. For example, one beer or a coffee takes an unspecified but definite amount time.

Creating informal time keeping recognizes that the content of these interactions can be exhausting and need a clear end, without introducing awkwardly formal structures.

4. Acknowledge the Topic

Allow participants to elect into and confirm their participation

Actively acknowledging and confirming the topic you are going to discuss is not something we would normally do in the course of a conversation. Take a moment to stop and make it explicit. This recognizes a shift and encourages participants to be more engaged and thoughtful.

Participants must choose to be a part of this kind of participation. Do not trick or coerce someone into the interaction. Be open to people, whether they are willing to engage or not.

Confirmation is also an opportunity to make it clear there is no end goal here. You are not engaging in a debate or trying to convince. The goal is simply the engagement process.

It was important for me that I not begin a conversation until the person who approached me acknowledged he/she wanted to discuss race and not just have a conversation. Even if someone spoke with me, but did not make it explicit they wanted have a conversation about race, I waited for them to bring it up.

Engagement is the heart of this work. The Engage step is focused on process and highlights the importance of being bold, open, flexible and not attached to an outcome.



ENGAGE

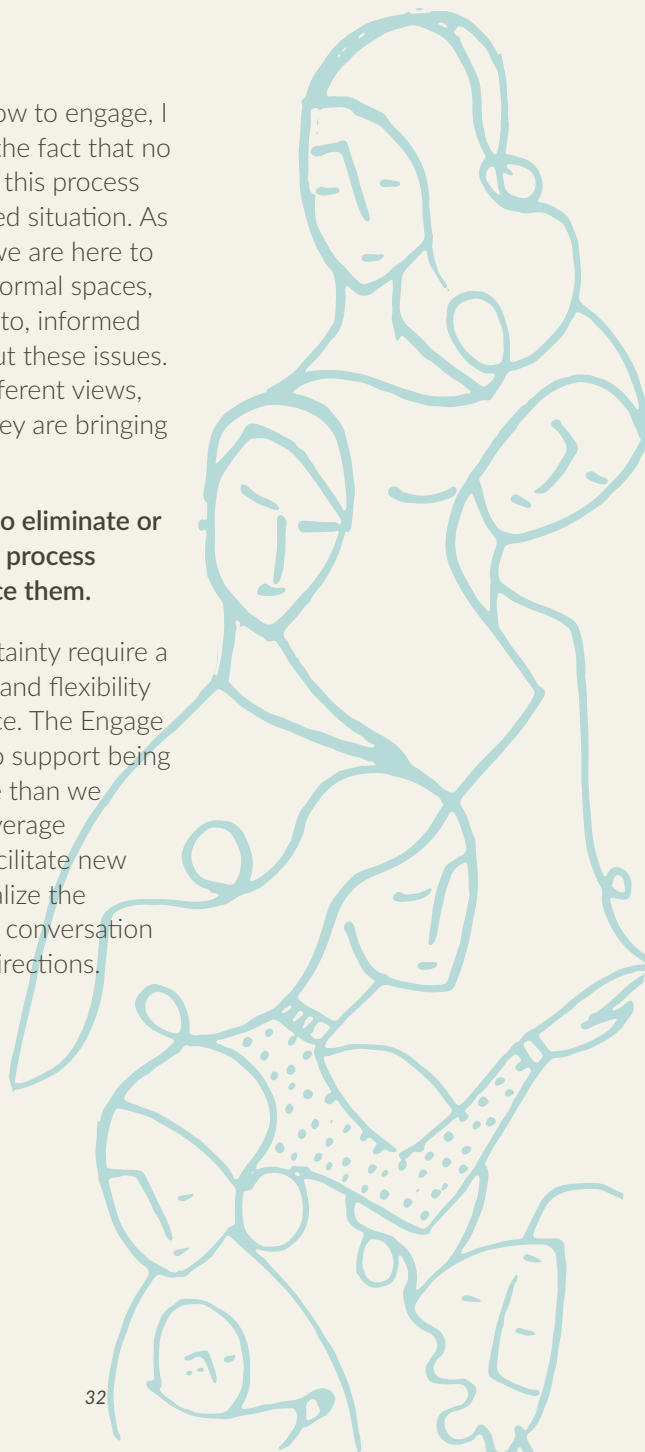
Five process-focused strategies:

- > Conversation guidelines
- > Look for experiences, emotions
- > Draw connections & highlight differences
- > Make it explicit
- > Let go

As we begin to discuss how to engage, I want to call attention to the fact that no matter how you set it up, this process does not create a managed situation. As stated at the beginning, we are here to engage with people in informal spaces, who may not be as open to, informed about, or passionate about these issues. Participants may have different views, goals, and experiences they are bringing to the engagement.

Rather than attempting to eliminate or lessen uncertainties, this process encourages us to embrace them.

Such high levels of uncertainty require a certain amount of daring and flexibility throughout the experience. The Engage strategies are designed to support being more bold and vulnerable than we typically are. Here, we leverage uncertainty, using it to facilitate new understanding, and to realize the opportunity available in a conversation that could go in infinite directions.



Conversation Guidelines

Set expectations

Before beginning, it is extremely helpful to have guidelines to which the conversation participants agree. The guidelines I developed for these conversations are helpful because they set certain expectations about the kind of conversation you are looking to have. They encourage people to be honest, authentic, open up, and listen intently. These conversations have a deeply personal nature and the guidelines help set the tone.

If possible, bring the guidelines to life in a physical form that integrates into the space. Throughout the interaction, it is helpful to have these physical and visual reminders for both participants. They help keep the conversation on track and not veer in unhelpful directions. I used a series of coasters that sat on the bar. It was helpful to lay the guidelines out and have a visual cue that was not overly ostentatious.

GUIDELINE #1

This is a conversation about personal experience, not expertise.

By discussing experiences, we are practicing how to build mutual understanding, and not teaching a lesson.

Neither person has more or less expertise when it comes to personal experience and one person cannot be called out as being “wrong.” This allows us to have a discussion, rather than a debate. If you have particular expertise related to the conversation, bring it up only as it relates to your experience.

GUIDELINE #2

*Be genuine and
share authentically.*

Being authentic can be quite challenging, especially when discussing a sensitive topic. You may feel afraid or vulnerable when being honest and open. However, authenticity is critical.

Being genuine is the heart of a meaningful conversation. It is through authentic exchanges that we are able to create new ways of seeing and generate powerful ideas.

GUIDELINE #3

*There is no right or
wrong thing to say.*

This is a space to share. We are looking to develop awareness and acceptance of ourselves and our environment. We want to be open to truly discovering how our experiences and cultural lenses affect the way we see and interact with the world. This may mean sharing something outside of what we are “supposed to” think or say. We are sharing these realities without judgment.

GUIDELINE #4

*Ask questions to clarify and
reflect back what you hear.*

Don't be afraid to ask questions. Ask for clarification when you don't understand. Try to reflect back what you heard the other person say. We interpret stories through our own lenses and experiences. Through reflection, we can become more aware of our lenses and also help make each other aware of how our stories are heard by others.

Look for Experiences, Emotions

Seek understanding, not facts

How do you begin talking to someone about race? In these interactions we are seeking new knowledge and deeper understanding. Ask questions to discuss our **experiences, backgrounds, and cultural lenses**. Seek to understand emotions and feelings connected to events, rather than a sequence of facts.

On the following page is a list of questions I prepared for conversations. You may choose to use these same questions or ones similar to them. What is important to note is that they ask about experiences, identities, and emotions.

This kind of questioning is a purposeful approach to help us understand the underlying forces that shape and influence our relationship to the issues we are discussing.

If your conversation takes a specific direction, remember to include an emphasis on **experience, emotion, and background influences** in follow up questions.

Suggested Questions

How do you **feel** talking about race?
How do you **feel** talking about racial issues? Where do you think these feelings come from?

What has been your **experience** of race in the United States?

What **values** do you hold about how to treat other people? How do you make those values visible through action?

What are some **groups** you belong to? What do these group belongings say about you?

Tell a story about a time in your life you were different from the people around you? What happened? How did it feel? How has this incident influenced your choices since?

What is your **cultural background**/where are you from? How does this background affect the way you experience race? How does it affect your communication style?



Draw Connections, Highlight Differences

Use every opportunity to build trust and open up

Throughout the conversation it is helpful to notice when there is something that is similar between one another and something that is markedly different. **Strong similarities or differences are entry points to insights about why we think, feel, or behave in certain ways.**

They are often a reflection of shared or individual cultural or professional lenses we may bring to the subject.

Call these moments out. It provides a nonjudgmental opportunity to orient to one another and feel more comfortable knowing where the other person stands in relation to your experiences and viewpoints. Recognizing these opportunities builds trust and improves communication.

Make What You Do Not Know Explicit

Being vulnerable is critical to building new knowledge

If something comes up that you do not know, make it explicit. This could be anything from a word that is used, an historical event, or a story you do not understand.

These moments of disclosure are the single most powerful tool I have discovered in this process. Opening up about what you do not know shows your willingness to be vulnerable with your conversation partner. It builds trust and sets an expectation for the other participant to acknowledge something they do not know.

The goal here is to develop awareness and understanding. By allowing ourselves and our partner to be vulnerable and realize things we do not know, we are taking the most important step to building new knowledge.

Let Go

Engaging in the process is the goal

Even though we have stated reasons for wanting to engage, these interactions are ultimately about maintaining the process, not achieving a stated outcome.

One of the biggest missteps you can make is entering an interaction with the goal of “changing” someone. You cannot change someone else. We can provide space, permission, and the opportunity to develop new insights, deeper understanding and change, if we choose, for ourselves.

The creation and facilitation of the process is where we want to be focused.





After putting in the effort to engage, make sure to take time to reflect on what occurred. Regardless of how the interaction went, purposeful reflection helps focus what you take away from the conversation and reinforce the learnings and understandings you want to remember from the interaction. Human brains are wired to remember negative experiences and more easily forget positive or beneficial experiences. Without reflection, we lose out on much of the benefit from an experience or interaction.



REFLECT

Once again, two-parts:
internal, then external

Internal Reflection

Take time to deepen the experience

Purposeful reflection is not just thinking about what happened. Record your experience to actively deepen what happened. Everyone has their own approach for how you like to record thoughts and feelings. I encourage you to do it in a way that you can go back and review what you had to say.

My favorite method is making an audio recording on my phone. It is always accessible and I can easily plug my headphones in and listen to what I had to say. Another popular method is writing in a journal.

A lot can happen in the space of one of these conversations. Some helpful points for reflection are:

- Simply summarize what happened.
- How did the interaction make you feel? How did you feel before, during, and after?
- What thoughts or judgments did you have about the other person? What do those reactions tell you about yourself?
- What parts of the process were difficult for you to maintain?
- What do you know or understand now, that you didn't before the conversation?
- What do you think you might do differently after having this interaction?

External Reflection

Allow the interaction to inform how we are in the world

You took the time to have and deepen the experience. Now, actively allow it to be in the world. External reflection is a bit of a paradox, but what I mean is to actively allow what you are learning and practicing in this process to inform your thoughts, perspective, and actions in everyday life. Be open to being changed.

This underscores the point that we do not go into these engagements seeking to change someone else, but to engage. Change may or may not happen. If we choose, the engagement may lead to change in ourselves. Seek to be a person that takes understanding out into the world through attitude, thoughts, and action. Let it change how we approach and shape our environment.

CLOSING THOUGHTS



Reframe “Action”

The work of this guidebook asks people who are concerned about racism to go out into the world and engage with people (even strangers!) on a sensitive, difficult, and contentious topic. It asks you to do this in the fabric of your everyday life and not in a managed setting.

It is an unusual proposition. It is risky and daring. However, the process is set up to transform what might seem unusual, risky, or daring, into something meaningful and possibly transformational.

Through purposeful engagement, we are building our capacity as a society to more consciously understand and influence our cultural environment. We are learning how to connect and deeply engage with others through our experience.

Though simple, it is one of the most powerful actions we can take, and it is always available to us if we are willing.

Simply Engage

The second, and ultimately more important ask, is to simply engage, for the sake of engagement. That is everything this process is advocating: to talk to as many people as we can about race, to ask people to reflect on the idea of experiencing privilege, to draw awareness to our possible biases.

It is not asking people to change what they think about race or how they act in the world. While it clearly takes the stance that we need to be more aware of racial inequity and work to eliminate structural racism, it does not even ask that in order to do that you must change other people's minds.

This is also an unusual proposition. In order to change the system, don't we have to change the people with whom we are working?

The engagement promotes self-directed change, that comes from your own beliefs and experiences. This approach is different from overt political action or formal training. Rather than asking people to change, it provides an opportunity and a space for us to be more aware, and hopefully more intentional in how we interact with and shape our environment.

Through direct, intentional, authentic connection with other human beings, we are creating the change we seek.

