

# How to have conversations about race

BY DENNIS SPARKS

**JSD:** Your book “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*” and *Other Conversations About Race* (HarperCollins, 1997) is used in many university courses and is studied by teachers and administrators. In Ann Arbor, Mich., where I live, your book was used earlier this year in a community wide library-sponsored reading program. When you spoke at a local community college in relation to that program, you received a standing ovation before you even began speaking. I’m curious

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about why you think your ideas are receiving such a positive reception these days.

**Tatum:** The applause I received was an expression of appreciation for being able to have a conversation about race. People know these conversations are important, but they don’t know how to have them. The book has given them a language and some tools that have helped facilitate the conversation. That was my intent, and it’s been gratifying to have people say that it has been helpful in that way.

## FORMING IDENTITIES

**JSD:** I’d like to talk with you about three large and important subjects: the formation of identity, white

privilege, and active anti-racism.

In your book, you note that the parts of identity that humans notice are those that other people reflect back to them. For black students, that means the reflection is distorted by racism. You also observe that when individuals are members of a dominant or advantaged social group, that aspect of their identity is so taken for granted that they don’t notice it. You write that “whites can easily reach adulthood without thinking much about their racial group. ... Most of the white people I talk to either have not thought about their race and so don’t feel anything or have thought about it and felt guilt and shame.”

So we have white educators who have given little thought to their



Beverly Daniel Tatum

racial identities and black students for whom the development of a positive and affirming identity represents a significant life task. Those problems seem closely intertwined.

**Tatum:** Absolutely. When I talk with teachers, I offer several guiding assumptions. One is that all of us have a racial identity to which we may or may not have paid attention. If you are a person of color in our society, it's

hard to go very far in your life without someone bringing your racial group membership to your attention. If you are a white person living in a largely white community, you can go a very long time without anyone commenting on your whiteness.

A second guiding assumption is that I want people to feel good about their racial identities. It's important for me as a mother of African-

American sons, for example, that they feel good about their racial and ethnic heritage. At the same time, I want white people to feel good about being white. I'm not talking about the white supremacy we might associate with neo-Nazi groups or the Klan, but instead to feel good about the persons they are. I didn't choose to be a black person; you didn't choose to be a white person. I want people to feel good about who they are without presumed superiority or inferiority to others.

A third assumption is that adolescents of color really begin to think about their identities during adolescence. That's an important time to explore racial and ethnic identity. While white youth are also exploring their identity at this time, they usually aren't exploring the racial aspects of that identity. So it's not uncommon to find adolescents of color actively exploring identity, which manifests itself in styles of dress, patterns of speech, music, and who they hang out with in the corridors of their schools.

All of this is happening in the presence of white teachers who have no personal history with that type of identity exploration, nor have they given much thought to their own identities, even in midlife. If one person is having an experience that another has not shared or even thought about, it's easy to see where

there can be misunderstanding and conflict. This is particularly true when adults respond by telling youngsters not to do the things associated with their identity exploration: Don't wear those clothes, don't listen to that music, don't talk that way, don't sit together in the cafeteria.

#### TALK ABOUT RACE

**JSD:** This brings us to the subject

**"Adolescents of color really begin to think about their identities during adolescence. That's an important time to explore racial and ethnic identity."**

of white privilege. In your book, you define racism as “a system of advantage based on race” and observe the high costs this country pays for racism — the loss of human potential, lowered productivity, increasing fear and violence, and the stifling of human growth and development. You write that “... all white people, intentionally and unintentionally, do benefit from racism.” In addition, you point out:

- “[M]ost white people, if they are really being honest with themselves, can see that there are advantages to being white in the United States.”

- “White people are paying a significant price for the system of advantage. The cost is not as high for whites as it is for people of color, but a price is being paid.”

- “Privilege goes unnoticed, and all but the most blatant acts of racial bigotry are ignored. Not noticing requires energy.”

**“I find that when you create a space in which people can share those experiences, they acknowledge how much they are carrying around. When they can talk about it, they say they feel lighter and energized.”**

**Tatum:** I’d like to elaborate on that last point. When I work with teachers, I ask them to notice something in the room — the pattern on the carpet, something that’s on the wall, or whatever. They quickly see that when they have paid attention to something and then try to stop thinking about it, energy is required.

This is evident when I ask people to think about their earliest race-related memories. Most people can tell you something they saw or heard when they were 5, 6, or 7 years old. When I ask for the emotion associated with that experience, they’ll say embarrassment, confusion, anxiety, or fear. Then I ask who they discussed the experience with. Often they will say they didn’t talk about it because it was their father who said the confusing thing or they understood that it was not something they were supposed to talk about.

If you think about the fact that we’ve all had these experiences and we’ve been socialized not to speak about them, the next step is to block out that you are even having the experience. We start to tune things out, which takes energy. I find that when you create a space in which people can share those experiences, they acknowledge how much they are carrying around. When they can talk about it, they say they feel lighter and energized.

### START THE WORK

**JSD:** Given the segregated nature of our society, white people mostly associate with other white people in their work settings, schools, neighborhood groups, or faith communities. I assume that the dynamics you’ve described apply even in all-white groups.

**Tatum:** That’s true. I remember working with a group of 60 teachers in which there were only four teachers of color. We wanted to divide the group into two groups of 30. One way, of course, was to divide the four teachers of color among the two groups. After some discussion, we decided to put all four teachers of color in one group so that there would be greater diversity of voice among them. That meant that the other group was entirely white. That group was unhappy because its members claimed they could not have a productive conversation about race if they didn’t have any people of color in their group. There was, however, in that group a woman who was pretty sophisticated about racism who stood up and said, “We have all the information we need in this group to talk about racism. This is not to say there isn’t something to be gained from hearing the perspectives of people of color, but we as white people have lots of experience with racism — observing it, practicing it — and it’s important that we talk about it.

While it would be great to have people of color in our group, we don’t have to wait for their presence for us to begin this dialogue.”

That was a very powerful statement. Not everyone agreed with her or even understood her point, but I think she was exactly right. There are many conversations that white people can have with each other about the ways that race and racism affect their lives that are in some ways easier to have without the presence of people of color.

The point is that we all have work to do, and we can begin where we are. If we have a mixed group, that’s great. If we don’t, it doesn’t mean we have to wait; we can still get started.

### ACTIVE ANTI-RACISM

**JSD:** You write, “The relevant question is not whether all whites are racist, but how we can move more white people from a position of active or passive racism to one of active anti-racism? ... [T]he fact of white privilege means that whites have greater access to the societal institutions in need of transformation. To whom much is given, much is required.” I’m curious about the processes or steps through which white educators move themselves toward active anti-racism.

**Tatum:** When white people become involved in this area, it is often out of a deep sense of injustice and personal conviction or a commitment to a person of color — a close friend, a colleague, or a student. They see how racism has affected that person’s life and feel compelled to speak up about it.

### FINDING OUR VOICES

**JSD:** As you describe it, active anti-racism seems to have at its core finding our voice and standing up for our point of view.

**Tatum:** Yes. It begins with a feeling that you need to do something. An example is a racial or ethnic joke

told in the teachers' room. People chuckle at it, but you are thinking to yourself that it is not really funny or that you hate coming into the lounge and hearing those types of jokes.

The person who is telling the joke is being active in the perpetuation of racial stereotypes. Those who listen — even if they don't laugh — are passively perpetuating them. The only way to actively interrupt the process is to speak up and say, "I don't think jokes like that are funny."

Some people tell me they want to speak up, but they don't know how. A strategy that I share is called "the three F method," which stands for "felt," "found," "feel." Using this approach, someone might say: "I felt that way. I used to think those jokes were funny. Then I found out that those types of comments reinforce stereotypes and create a hostile environment. It explains why black teachers don't hang out in our teachers' room. Now I feel that it's really important to let you know what I think about this behavior." You don't attack the person. To the extent you can honestly say that you used to think and feel that way, it's a respectful and relatively nonthreatening method to communicate a different perspective.

People are afraid that conversations about race will lead to conflict and anger. A student said to me, "You talk about racism like you talk about what you had for breakfast. You don't seem anxious about it. How are you able to do that?" I told her that it takes practice and assured her that the first time I interrupted someone's joke it wasn't easy. But it does get easier with practice. While sometimes we don't know what to do on the spot, we can go back later and say, "Yesterday when we were having lunch something happened that I didn't say anything about at the time. I went home, thought about it, and wished I had spoken. So I want to

talk about it today because it has been bothering me."

### SET A CONTEXT FOR TALK

**JSD:** You offer the following observation to explain why black students sit together in the cafeteria: "When feelings, rational or irrational, are invalidated, most people disengage. They not only choose to discontinue the conversation but are more likely to turn to someone who will understand their perspective."

The same dynamic, I suppose, would apply to adults exploring racial issues. You seem to be making that point elsewhere in the book as well: "When we do not feel heard, we feel invalidated, and a relational discon-

nection has taken place." I'm interested in how administrators and teacher leaders cultivate an organizational culture that promotes honest and direct discussions of race and other difficult subjects and in which people feel listened to and respected.

model what they want faculty members to do. When leaders openly address issues, they set a context for these discussions. When you are in a leadership role, people pay attention to what you say and do. If leaders believe it is important that everyone in the school community feel included, then they'll be inclusive in their style of operation. If they learn and use a few Spanish phrases in a school with a large Spanish-speaking population or make the effort to provide materials in multiple languages, it signals to those who are watching that this is important. When I used to offer professional development courses for teachers, superintendents sent a powerful message when they signed

### BEVERLY DANIEL TATUM

**POSITION:** Scholar, teacher, author, administrator and race relations expert Beverly Daniel Tatum is the ninth president of Spelman College. Tatum is a clinical psychologist whose areas of research interest include black families in white communities, racial identity in teens, and the role of race in the classroom. For more than 20 years, Tatum taught a course on the psychology of racism. She has also toured extensively, leading workshops on racial identity development and its impact in the classroom.

**EDUCATION:** She earned a bachelor of arts degree in psychology from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., and a master's and Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Michigan. She also holds a master of arts degree in religious studies from Hartford Seminary.

**PROFESSIONAL HISTORY:** Before her appointment to the Spelman presidency in 2002, Tatum spent 13 years at Mount Holyoke College, serving in various roles during her tenure there: professor of psychology, department chair, dean of the college, and acting president. Before joining the Mount Holyoke faculty in 1989, Tatum was an associate professor and assis-

tant professor of psychology at Westfield State College in Westfield, Mass., and a lecturer in black studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

**PUBLICATIONS:** She is author of the critically acclaimed 1997 book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* and *Other Conversations About Race* (HarperCollins, 1997). Tatum is also the author of *Assimilation Blues: Black Families in a White Community* (Greenwood Press, 1987). In addition, she has published numerous articles, including the 1992 *Harvard Educational Review* article, "Talking About Race, Learning About Racism: An Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom."

**PERSONAL:** Tatum was raised in Bridgewater, Mass. She is married to Travis Tatum, a professor of education at Westfield State College, and is the mother of two sons.

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### ACT AND LEARN

**JSD:** You tell a story about designing a university course in which you did not feel like an expert on the subject matter. But you thought it

was an important course to offer so you adopted the motto, “Just do it.” I took away from your story the idea that sometimes it’s important to act and learn from that action rather than to wait for perfect knowledge or a perfect situation.

**Tatum:** I have two thoughts about the “just do it” approach. One is that if I had waited until I could do it perfectly, I never would have done it. The other thought is that I didn’t simply create my course out of nothing. I read books, did some research, and took advantage of the tools that were available to me.

In some areas, of course, you can do harm without sufficient preparation. For example, some people watch a very powerful video about Jane Elliot’s brown-eyed/blue-eyed experiment called “The Eye of the Storm,” where she is shown working with 3rd graders on a lesson about discrimination. Some people who see it will think, “I’ll go to school tomorrow and try it.” It’s important that we not launch into such sensitive areas without sufficient thought or preparation.

There are times, though, when it’s important to act, and that’s why it’s critical to have a community around us that can provide feedback on what we’re doing. That’s a wonderful thing about schools in which you have several people in the building working on these issues. Such activity doesn’t have to cost a great deal. Books and other materials can be quite inexpensive. For an administrator to say, “I don’t have a lot of money, but I consider this important and will create this opportunity for you” carries the kind of powerful message we talked about a moment ago.

#### EVERYDAY LEADERS

**JSD:** The next issue of *JSD* will contain an interview with Deborah Meyerson, author of *Tempered Radicals: How Everyday Leaders Inspire Change at Work* (Harvard Business

School Press, 2003). Her research revealed that there are people whose race, gender, professional training, or some other factor causes them to simultaneously stand within and outside the organizations in which they work. It’s her view that when these individuals bring their voices to their organizations, they function as “everyday leaders” who have the capacity to transform their work settings. The small group support you described is one means by which individuals can find and express their voices as everyday leaders to transform their schools.

**Tatum:** Absolutely. For many years, I taught a course on the psychology of racism. The course had three parts — what, so what, and now what. The “what” was deepening our understanding of racism in its individual, cultural, and institutional manifestations. The “so what” addressed the impact racism has on both people of color and white people. The “now what” is concerned with what we will do about it.

I asked my college students and teachers in professional development programs to create an action plan that translated what they learned into interventions in their spheres of influence — their classrooms, schools, or other areas, whatever they might be. Asking people to reflect on their spheres of influence is a really powerful way to counter the discouragement people naturally feel when they look at a really big problem like racism in our society. Even the most junior teachers can affect what goes on in their classrooms, particularly how they engage with students each day.

After a while I began to take my own advice. I started thinking about my own sphere of influence, not only what it was at that moment, but how I could make it bigger. I began by working with teachers, and the teachers said principals were important. So I started to work with principals.

#### A PRINCIPAL’S QUESTION

**JSD:** And one of the principals asked you, “Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?” which led to your book and an even broader circle of influence.

**Tatum:** Exactly.

#### A CALLING

**JSD:** In an essay you provided for *When Race Becomes Real: Black and White Writers Confront Their Personal Histories* (Lawrence Hill Books, 2002), you observed, “We are all works in progress.” I’m curious about what sustains your progress within the arc of your own unique life.

**Tatum:** I am a spiritual person. In the early 1990s, I had a very powerful experience that led me to understand the work I do in unlearning racism as a kind of calling.

One thing many people don’t know about me is that in 2000 I received a master’s degree in religious studies from Hartford Seminary. Hartford Seminary provides theological education for laypeople; it was one of the best learning experiences I’ve ever had. I did not attend, though, to become an ordained minister. What I learned there was that in the context of my faith tradition, ministry really means to serve, and there are many kinds of service. I think of my ministry as education and the work I do related to racism as part of that picture.

In “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*” and *Other Conversations About Race*, I talk about the importance of having a support circle that encourages you. An ordained minister friend in my circle who knows that my work is draining reminds me that lots of emotional withdrawals require lots of deposits. I have learned when I am in need of deposits and how to get them. And for me that’s closely linked to my sense of myself as a spiritual being. ■